PR295

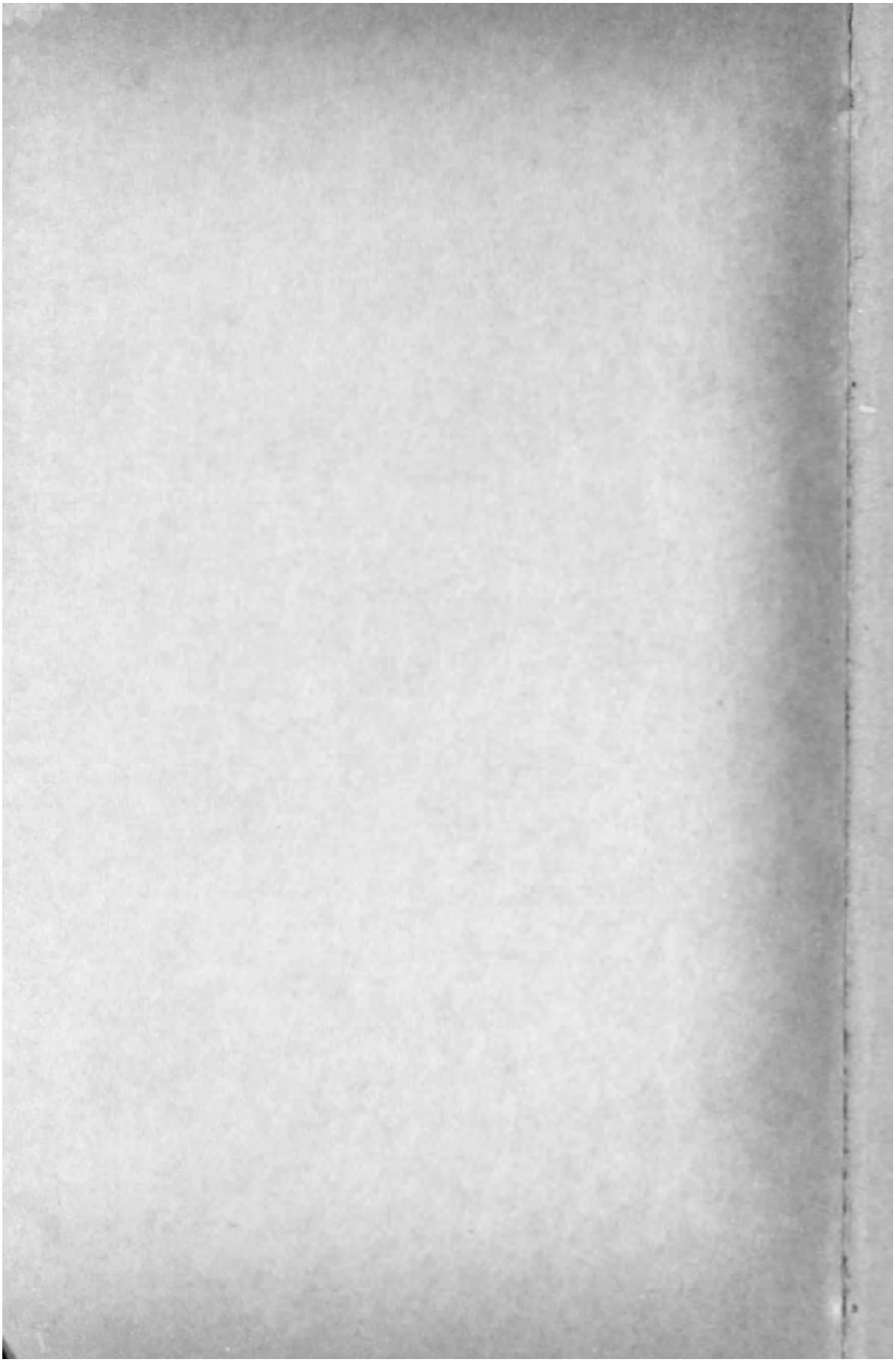
A PLEASURE READER

1.95

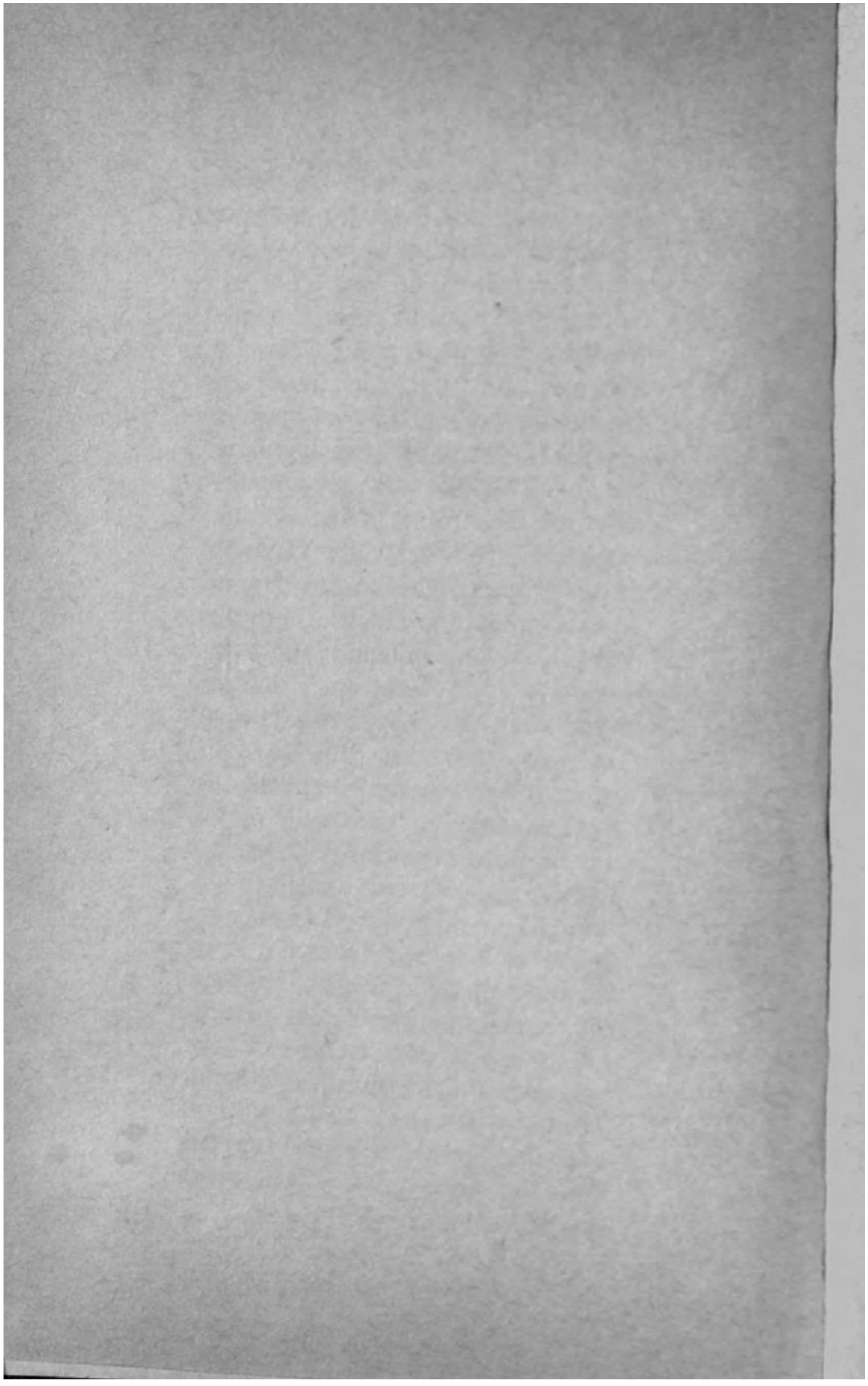
SWAMP ANGEL

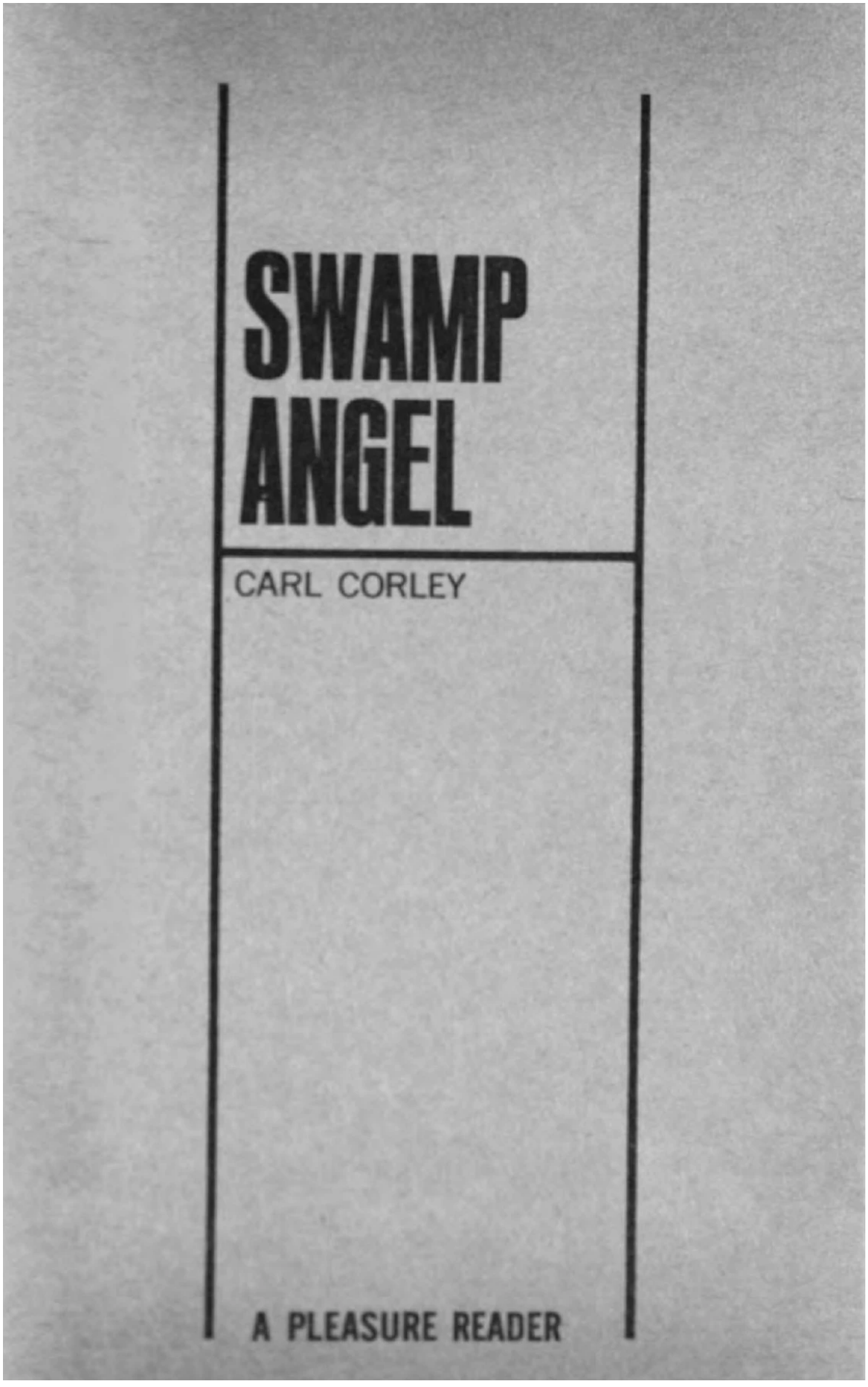
CARL CORLEY

NOT FOR SALE TO MINORS



Gabriel was in love with the dark stranger, and that was why he kept him prisoner in the swamps. Away from his wife and the rest of civilization, perhaps the stranger would succumb to Gabriel's advances. Just once, he reasoned, and the man would discover the joys of male love, and perhaps stay there forever. This was not unreasonable logic, as, according to the Hooker Report on homosexuality, "Human sexuality encompasses a broad range of behavior within which lie both the exclusive heterosexual and the exclusive and confirmed homosexual. Between these two exclusive extremes, there are individuals in whom a heterosexual preference is predominant but who will, under certain circumstances (such as imprisonment) become involved in homosexual behavior, and persons whose main erotic attraction is to members of their own sex but who will occasionally seek out heterosexual experiences." Gabriel's love was unbound by human intellectualizations—his was a love as natural and free and unashamed as the unsullied wonders of the wilderness in which he lived.

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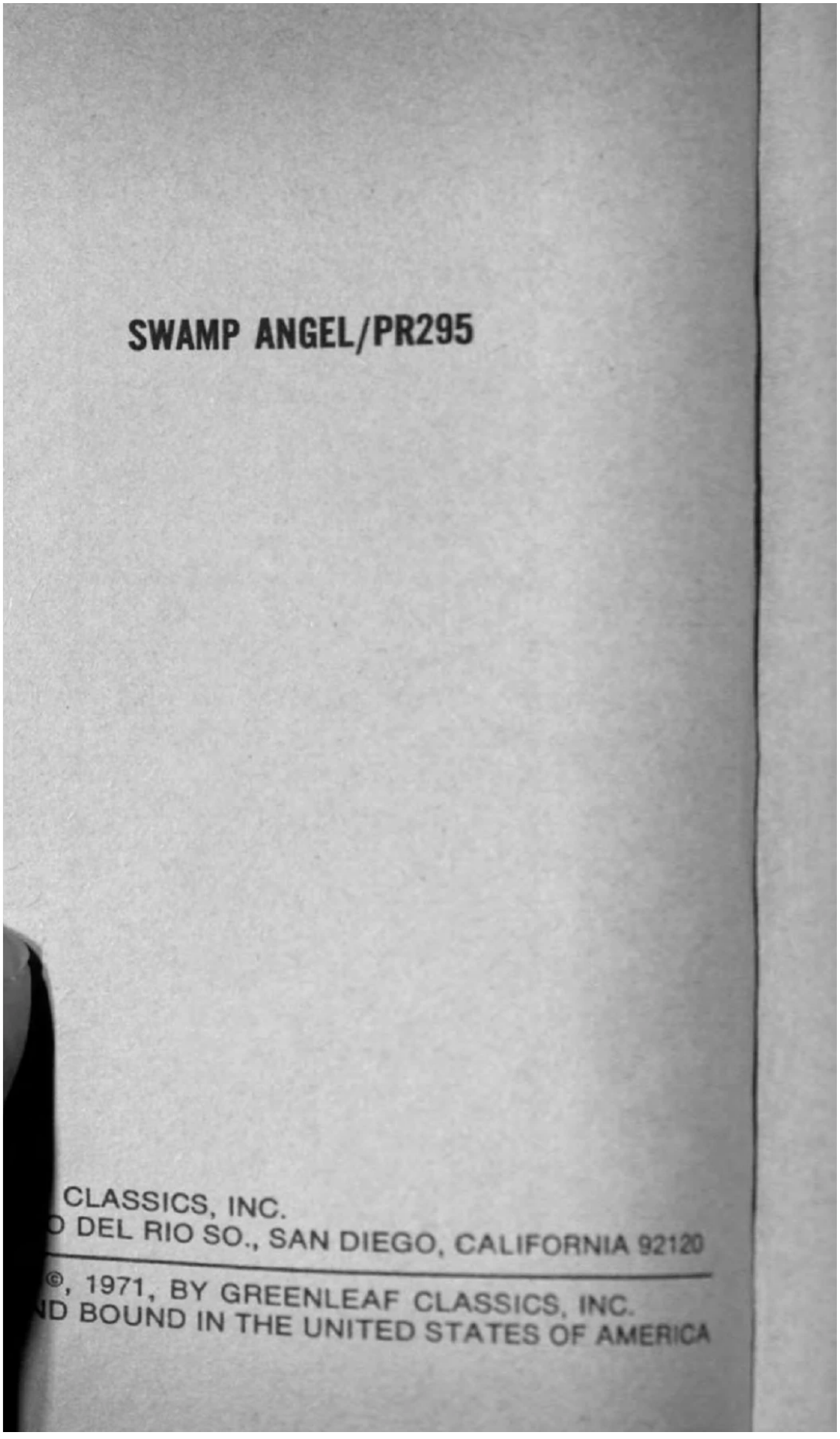
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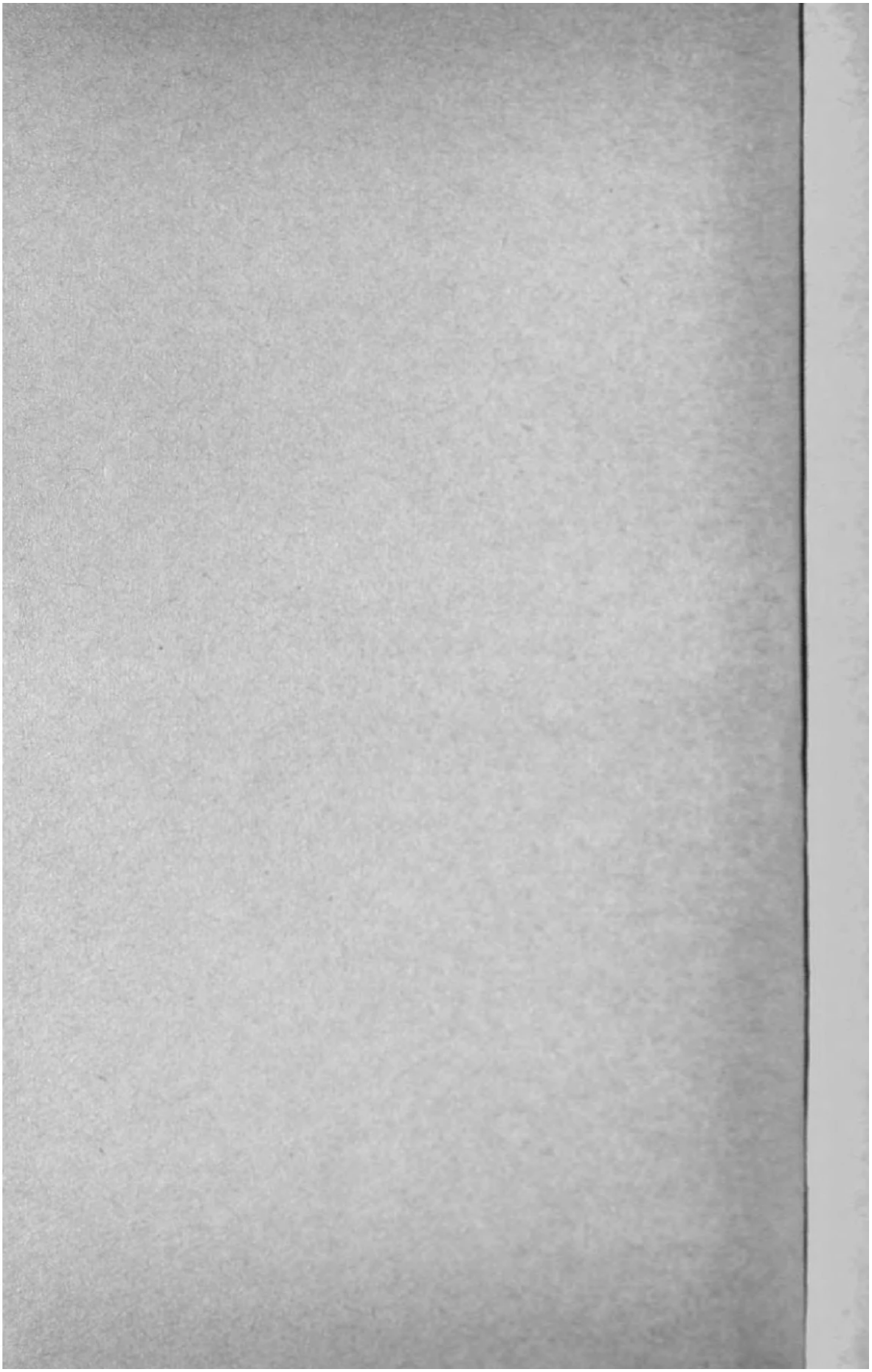
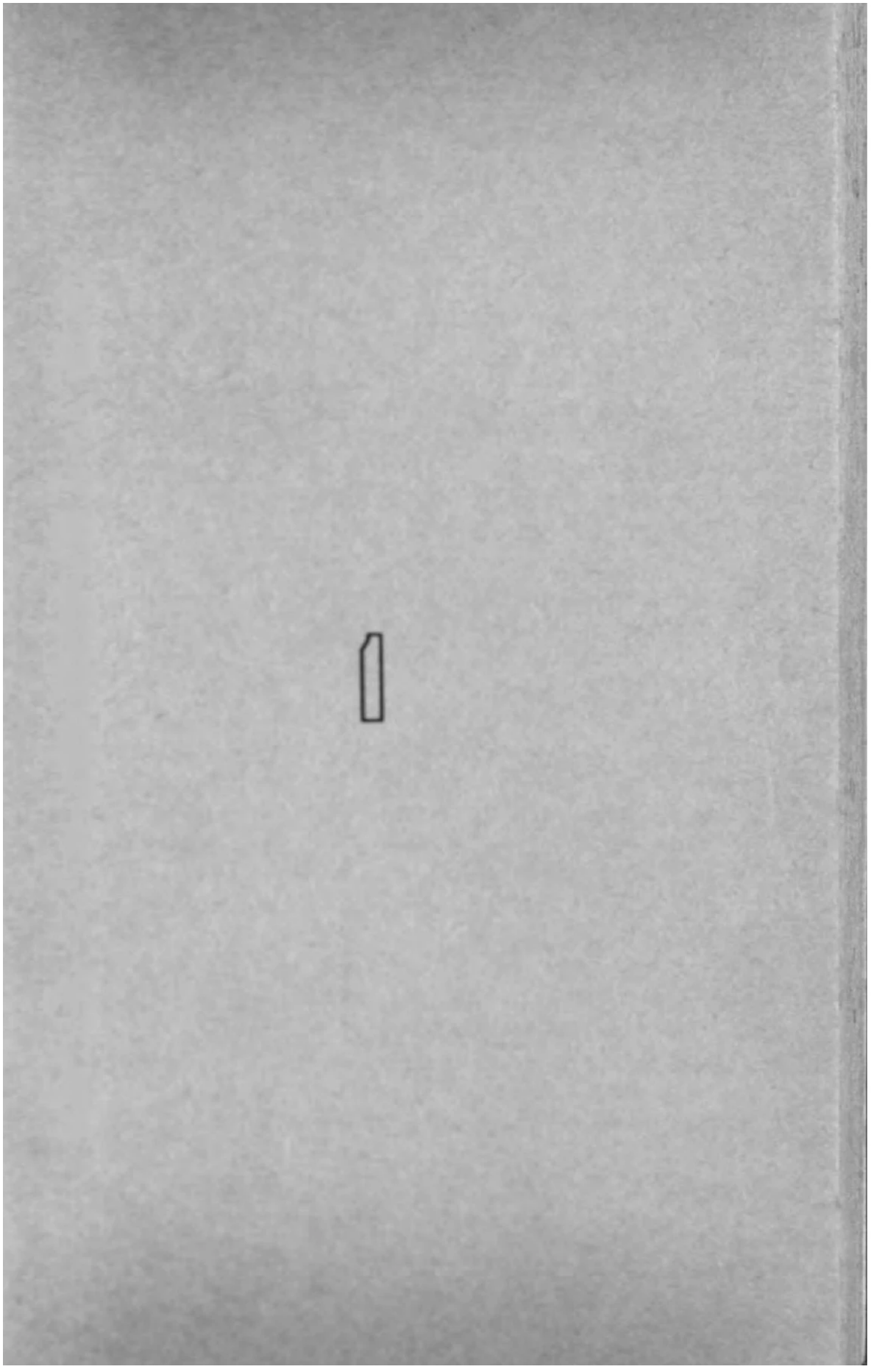
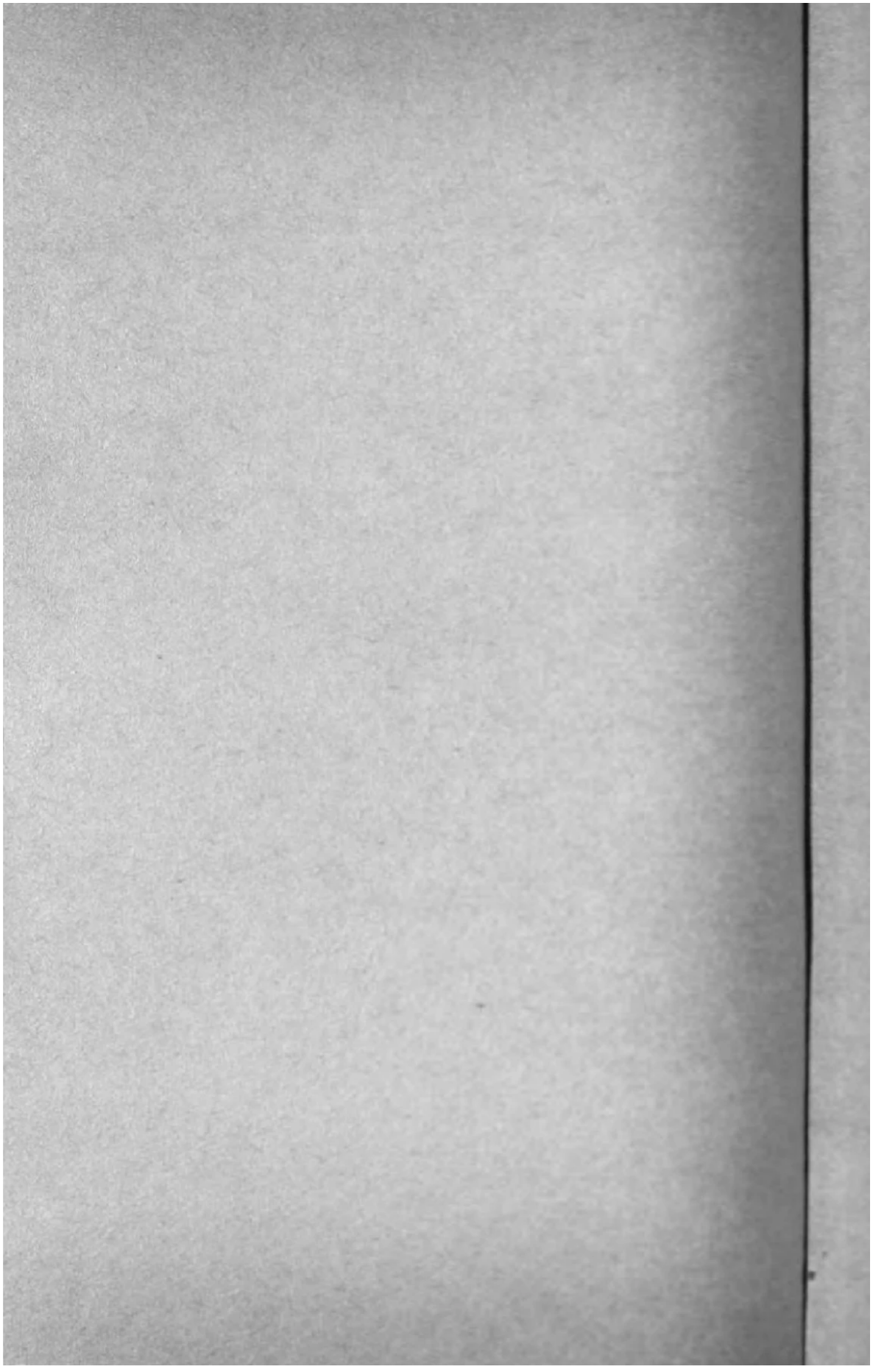
OF ALL THE LIVING THINGS
ON LAND AND SEA AND SKY
MAN MUST FIND A MATE
OR MAN WILL DIE.
——— THE AUTHOR







Gabriel Carondelet, better known to his senior classmates as Gabe, could understand the violence of storms, of hurricanes, of tropical winds and rains. He had been born and reared in the bayous of St. Martin Parish, in the heart of Louisiana. And he reasoned instinctively that all these elemental turmoils were the natural workings of God.

But he would never understand the violence of men.

Yet, an equal violence lurked within his strapping body, like the violence of an animal caged, rebellious, waiting to be set free. He was like an animal himself: lithe, hard, graceful, cunning as the fox, and as savagely beautiful. He was as footfree as the bobcats which screamed from the swamps. He was as dark-skinned as the yams unearthed from the black gumbo soil. He was wiry and fearless, and a cousin to the creatures of the wilds.

His hair was long and thick, the color of corn, and bleached from the sun. Unruly with curls, it fell over his eyes and tapered to a long peak at the nape of his neck. His eyes were black—intense black, like the grapes which lay shining beneath molded leaf and root. They were huge and soft, and glinted with the purest of lights. His long lashes grew thickly around them, and his eyebrows arched and lowered, according to his moods.

He was neither tall nor short, neither stout nor very slender; he was not dark nor fair, not handsome nor ugly. He had ugly things about him . . . like the little silver scar which ran directly below his right eye, seaming one side of his face. It gave to that profile an intent, relentless look. But that, too, could be beautiful and imposing by moonlight, lending him a savage ruggedness and charm. But his mouth, covering even, white teeth, was sensitive and sweet, and could be yielding at times. And his black eyes had so much delight in all they looked upon, and saw so much incipient splendor in common things, that they charmed you and led you into a spell, and would not let you think him dull or plain.

Too, having been country born and reared, he possessed a kind of ancient wisdom that complimented his firm, rugged face, his weatherworn and savage physique. He knew that the same heavens were not the same heavens for all. The rain did not fall equally on the evil and the good. He knew too, in this balmy spring of his high school graduation, that he lived in one world, everyone else in another. What his own world was he was not certain. But it was a strange and beautiful thing and, in a sense, he pitied other boys his age who seemed to be left out of this limbo of beauty and strangeness.

Now, at the age of twenty-one, he was often times moody and preoccupied. He moved down an invisible path, invisible to all but him, and he saw things, felt emotions he was certain no one else saw or felt. Intelligent enough to realize that though his odd behavior was a far cry more unorthodox than others, he felt strongly that all behavior, however strange it may seem, has its justification. So had his. And because of this assumption, he never brooded about his attitudes and desires, and panned them off as something special.

That he was different from other boys his age he was certain. And because of this difference he was forever unable to critize other people. Even at school, when other boys scoffed at an unfortunate kid, he refused to join in the ridiculing. He cringed at the sight of boys flinging grass snakes into the laps of girls just to hear them scream, or scaring them out of their wits with huge plastic spiders dangling on strings. And he could never be in on the kill at a hunt. He had this same expression of pity for small animals. Though he loved the outdoors, the unfenced wilds—which was forever home to him—and hunted and bagged game, more often than not—especially if a rabbit or squirrel or coon looked up at him from their traps with pleading eyes—he would set them free, or keep them. Then he would mend their wounds until they were healed before he would allow them to return to the treacherous inroads of the swamps.

These furry and bright-eyed citizens of the bayou were

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his friends, his playmates, even now at the threshold of his grownup years. He had reached a beautiful, exquisite maturity of body and limb, and humans, to a degree, were exluded from his world. Not that he did not desire them. He did. He admired the male. Almost from babyhood he possessed a hunger for the male form, the way the muscle played over the bone, the wild hair on arms and legs, the savage splendor of man. And this obsession, this idea of devouring with his gaze, became a violence, a dangerous lurking for danger . . . danger that could be seen in a look, a smile, a walk. Even his delicate nature had a touch of violence. Even his hands. Even in their humbleness during the setting free of small furry animals dappled with blood. Even his bulging crotch, under the tight cover of his faded jeans, nestled there, a radiant and somber anger, was violent as the organ of a wild stallion, as mysterious as a haze. Even the downward thrust of his nose gave him a roguish look. And the anxiety of his facial expressions made you uneasy. His walk was sensuous, depicting, with the animal-like play of every sinew and muscle advertising that within his aurora of mind and body, tragedy was forever constant.

Violent and wild and free. Yet, he was haunted with a deep inner tenderness for the male, which bordered on melancholy.

He lusted for his own sex in a fasion he could not comprehend. He longed to see them unhusked, to see those three black patches of hair, to tremble at the sight of male nakedness.

To him, even in earlier times, girls were of another race.

Gabe had been born and reared in a farmhouse a mile from Highway 96, between St. Martinville and Catahoula, in the very heart of the Teche, a farm bordering Longfellow Evangeline Memorial State Park. Like every fourth boy out of ten in these parts, he was given the name Gabriel, the hero's name in Longfellow's poem, *Evangeline*. It was a famous and ideal name to the Acadians in the Teche country, and told of a young girl who had crossed half the world to find her lover buried beneath a huge Evangeline oak. This special oak had been photographed more than

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any tree in the world. And in 1929, a statue of Evangeline and a church had been donated by Dolores Del Rio, the film actress who played the part of Emmeline Labiche in the movie, and the oak had become a symbol since–a reminder of the lost Acadian world. It was in the shadow of this beautiful oak that Gabe had kissed his first girl, his only encounter with passion for the female then and since. His passions had sought elsewhere . . . into areas of the flesh he dared not mention but dared to dream about when he was alone (which was often), hunting and fishing in Bayou Teche, in the shallows of Catahoula Coulee, Dauterive Lake, Portage River, roaming in the Rip Van Winkle gardens, looking for nests in the Bird City Sanctuary, exploring Avery Island, or hiking alone through the flat bayou country, the wind in his face, the snake grass slapping around his muddy ankles, the sounds of the hawk and curlew and the blue goose and the quacking of the gadwall duck, which was music in his ears.

This was the land of Jim Bowie, and Gabe loved the old life, and shunned the new, the modern, the psychedelic crazes, the modes of the senior class, all the tempting things which threatened to lure him out of his nervy moods, the dreams he fashioned of man . . . man, wild and lusty and naked as Tarzan of the apes, roaming the woods and bayous with him, laying with him at night on the sand bars under the pallor haze of an east moon.

These fancy dreams were flesh and blood to him, alive! They breathed. They talked to him. They were warm. Rapt in one of his spells, he could even catch the odor of man, male odors that made him grow faint, and he would become hypnotized, in a trance, while these naked images of his mind did strange, wonderful things to him, overpowered him, took him, lowering down over his own naked body the dark overwhelming power of theirs. He would become helpless when his dreams mastered him. And always the same male . . . Tarzan in looks and form, a giant, coming all naked and savage out of the shadows of the trees to smile at him, say warm, kindly things to him, to lay a naked arm around his shoulder, to pull him down into the

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elephant grass and cover him with his dark, strange world.

He never missed a Tarzan movie for this reason. And there were times when he would sit through them hour after hour just to relive a certain scene, to catch a close-up of a naked thigh, shoulders wet with sweat and straining under some impossible weight, veins crawling, the bones in Tarzan's beautiful feet.

In his love for this naked stranger, the sex partner of his young lusts, he read every book, in fact studied them, and in turn grew to master the bow and arrow, learned to throw a knife, and to swing through the trees. He had a pet hawk he named Nero, a fledgling he had found with its wing clipped one day in the shallows of Catahoula, and had nursed back to health. He had built a small cabin on a sand bar near the western tip of Dauterive Lake, his jungle kingdom. He needed nothing else, with the exception that one day Tarzan might walk through the leaves and moss, and into the clearing to claim his life.

His parents had different views. They wanted him to go to college at Southwestern and complete his education to become an engineer a much needed profession in the state. And his sister, Mithra, pleaded and complained continuously about the embarrassment of his "Tarzan appearance."

"But, Grandpere!" she would cry persistently, at the sight of Gabe returning from the swamps loaded with game, the blood running down his muddy legs. "He's mother-naked! And he smells like a wet coon!" She would make loud protests to their mother, mimicking emotions with her hands in deliberate Cajun fashion, and cry, "What'll my friends say at school? I've had it with him. A cannibal for a brother!"

"Well . . . merci!" he would reply, grinning from ear to ear and making light of her predicament. "If you can't make the grades at school don't put the blame on me . . . if you please."

"Oh, don't you have an ounce of pride?" she would scream. "Why, look at you! Suppose Angelique or Nannette dropped in . . . or Beau Thibodaux, what'd I do? And you

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half-naked?"

"Do? Do nothing! Now hush your silly trap and fix me a snack for I'm clemmed."

Gabe did like to go naked. Around the house, on warm days, he wore only a faded pair of jeans ripped of their legs, with frazzled edges mid-thigh, and an old pair of white sneakers. But once in the bayou and his cabin, he would unhusk his clothes and go about his hunting and gaming buck-ass. With his sling of arrows slung over his shoulder, Nero perched near his right ear, and with his long cypress staff he used to fight off the snakes, he would stalk the bayous by sunset light and by shallow dusk, a primitive-looking figure framed against the reddening sky. Naked and dark and beautiful and sinister, he would move across the scarlet skyline like the first dawning of man. He would make a silvery, watery trail between the adobes of the tall heron perched majestically on long, pink-stemmed legs, through droves of wading blue goose, among nests of the ibis and the furry nutria, whose pelts he sold for the beautification of women—women who had not, and could not touch his world.

Anyone carrying a staff feels like a God, in the most Biblical sense of the term, self-intoxicated, ready to strike others with thunderbolts, to terrorize mortals, and hand down the law in forms of insults, to bless or curse. And during these silent pilgrimages Gabe felt like a God, or a hero. Heroes he knew died young. Heroes were young, always. And during these secretive sessions with nature, plunging back into the primitive heart of Earth, he was his own hero—Rimbaud the Wanderer, or Tarzan, the savage, sexual heroes in his dreams.

He had no other heroes, with perhaps the exception of Alexander the Great. Numerous times he had read Karl V. Eiker's *Star of Macedon,* with excitement and resolve. It was the life of Alexander. He admired the youth's taming of wild stallions, his noble deeds in war, his staggering conquests. Too, and perhaps more than anything else, he was awed by Alexander's companion, a boy named Hephaestion. This boy had followed Alexander into battle.

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had slept at his side. They had been lovers. Gabe had never had a real friend, though he longed madly for one. Acquaintances yes. Boys he had gone to school with at St. Martinville High, boys he had played ball with, had defeated in pole-vaulting, track and swimming, but not lasting friends. He had befriended them during the usual annual outings: the mid-winter fair, the Shrimp Fleet Blessings, the Crawfish Festival, the Flower Festivals, at Mardi Gras in New Iberia, but not one had he singled out and made obvious overtures to . . . as he had done with the Tarzan of his mind. None of them were a Tarzan to him, not even a makeshift, not even a Hephaestion . . . and he wanted, like Alexander, a Hephaestion. Just why, he did not know. But he did know, for some odd reason of his own, that he loved to gaze at a well-built man, liked to watch the flexing of their muscles, the way the flesh played over the bones, the way the dark wiry hair grew in curling waves over forearms and thighs, the maddening way he knew it grew around their crotch. He liked to devour other classmates with his gaze at track and field games, and became overly excited whenever he saw them under the showers, their hides glistening from soap and water. He would tremble all over if one of them happened to bend over, or lifted a muscular thigh to reveal hairy groins. But stranger still, he contributed this to his own masculinity, his admiration for male for the male. This seemed to add further to his own fierce power and strength. It was as if the male magnetism in them reached out and took hold of his own senses, shaking him into an even more savage rediscovery of himself.

He mentally captured this same essence of spirit, almost physical, when he looked at a stallion. The strutted veins, the shining flanks, the sensuous underthighs, the dangling organ and melon-like testicles, the virile strength and ferocious power, a power there in flesh and blood which unnerved him and sent tremors through him, and this earthy admiration for the male animal fiercely brought out his great love for his own sex. So he loved to fondle the stallions when they ventured through the lush regions of

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the swamp to the edge of his cabin and he could be safely alone with them. He longed to fondle men, too, in this same manner.

That these odd whims and sensations carried his desires still further he was both aware and unaware of at the same time. They were but shadowy hints and glimpses, delights he felt momentarily within his own young body, but which he never had the nerve nor courage to pursue. He was merely too simple in his primitive personality to pursue something of the occult. It was not his nature, he tried to reason with himself, always doubtful and puzzled. He burned inside to pay homage to man's fierce beauty, to fulfill his deep and ever present hungers. But along his path of loneliness and hungers he never came upon a counterpart, another male who would compromise.

Naturally at school he had overheard whisperings and murmurings: of the old queer who stood on the corner of Lafayette street in front of the drug store, lurking for young boys; of the boy who played with dolls and was considered a sissy; of a man who worked in a womens clothing store and was picked up by the police for wearing feminine attire; of circle jerks, and stud jacks, and daisy chains, and blow jobs and cornholing. And all these wild things ran from young mind to mind like a crazy merry-go-round for any ears that cared to listen. He had heard but not listened. This was not the world for which he hungered. He had sat in on school chum conversations that had gone like this:

"This old guy picked me up, see, one day out on Highway 70, wanted to drive me to Morgan City and get a hotel room. Said he'd give me a five. The old, fat, baldheaded fucker!"

"He put his hand on my leg at Randy's bar, let his little finger slide over my balls. I wanted to knock hell out of that old queer nanny!"

"A guy offered me a Babe Ruth once in the pissery of the Hart movie house if I'd let him jack me off. Got so mad I couldn't enjoy Roy Rogers after that. And he kept pestering me from seat to seat till I called the manager and

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had him tossed out."

"You can go to Bienville Square in Mobile and see lots of them kind of knuckleheads. I know—used to live there."

"I could make a million dollars if I wanted to. Them cats pay plenty just to swing on your rod."

"One sucked me one time. Got so sick I puked."

"I just pretended to come. That old coon-ass fruit didn't know the difference."

"You can't go no place without them queer weirdos eyeballing you."

"You can always spot a cocksucker. The first thing he looks at is your crotch."

"They ought to bulldoze them sons of bitches into the Gulf."

"Them queers don't deserve to live."

"If there's anything I hate worse than a queer it's a queer without money."

"They'll fall for any line, just to get to suck your prick."

"What do they get out of it anyway?"

"Don't you fellows think Rene is a fruit? You notice how red he gets in the face when he has to take a piss?"

"He tried to hold my hand once."

"He'll be squatting to piss next."

Gabe heard these too, but with disinterest. They did not convey the deep root of his yearnings. Though their loose conversations spoke and revealed relations of men with other men . . . men with young boys . . . it was like discussing different foods. His tastes lay elsewhere. Had he really listened and absorbed, he would have been even more baffled and confused. But what he did listen to was the murmurs within his own beautiful body. They told him wild, fleeting, wonderful things, and his body, in every vein and sinew, danced to the music of this voice, burned with it, grew restless, anxious, driving his innermost thoughts onward in a thousand different restless ways. His fiery muscles and nerves pulsated with these haunting overtures. He had heard the call, like the blue goose, and he realized instinctively that he would answer that call someday, and obey it.

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Almost in a hypnotic trance, he had on numerous occasions gazed at the young colts on his father's farm sucking at their mother's breasts, stripping their long slender tits, and he had always transferred his own secret yearnings to that of himself in the center of the picture, hunched in the hollow of muscular loins, siphoning out the nectar which lay burning withing, pulling at the male tit of life, a colt at its father's flanks, bleeding the dangling stem of the life that would give him life . . . that had given him life. And he considered . . . primitively . . . how physiognomic this should be, the father giving of his body the same as with the mother. And he could, with little or no concentration, picture himself in the role, not with his own father, but with some strapping male yet unmet, and on all fours, his head bobbing beneath. At night, he would lie awake in bed and imagine to himself how it would be with one of the husky football stars at school, wondered what it would be like to become their colt . . . to suck freely of their flesh rods and to drink their milk.

One evening, in a hurry to get dressed and attend one of the local school functions, he had gone into the bathroom and caught his father accidently under the shower. The unsuspected sight of his father naked, his tall dark frame gilded with coarse black hair, his long prick dangling between his thighs, had caught his breath. With a faint apology he had started to close the door when his fater had said, "Come on in . . . we're both men, ain't we?" He had gone on in, fumbled for whatever he had needed, and in his fumbling his hand had innocently brushed his father's organ when he stepped out of the shower. For that one instant both men seemed to freeze, as if hypnotized. His father had not seemed to notice, or, if he had, he did not put it into words. Instead, he handed Gabe the towel and asked him to rub him down. Reluctantly, Gave took the towel and, with trembling, anxious hands, began to rub his father's broad back. His father was a field laborer, already dark from his Acadian inheritance, and darker still from the wind and sun and the elements. His hide was like furbished leather, pelted with coarse black hair that curled unruly over his muscle

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and bones. From hard field labor veins stood out vividly, and there was a fierce power to him, a lean strength which never seemed to tire nor relax.

This was a perfect foil for Gabe's absorption. Here was Tarzan and Alexander in the personage of his father. And as he obeyed his father's wishes, his gaze went over his body, devouring him, drinking into his mind the fulfillment of his male hunger.

After that his impression of his father changed. Heretofore he had been but a provider, a man who had no personal interests but making a living, a man who had no dreams, no goals, no personality . . . let alone a man endowed with the potentials of great sex. He had never thought of his father in terms of sex. He had never taken time to form mental pictures of his father making love to his mother, them naked together, wallowing in the sexual act.

Now he lusted for him, and felt a strange, warm love for him he once thought impossible. But for this reason, desiring to see him naked again, to lay his hands on that nakedness, he went out of his way to avoid him. But there were times, during his weaker, pensive moments, when he imagined how it would be to lie with his father, to have those field-hardened arms go around him, to lower his head into the dark hollow of those hairy, uplifted thighs, to thrill him with his lips on his prick, to give him a love, with his lolling tongue bathing his every part, that would make their father and son relationship a deep and wonderful and personal thing.

But to do so was, for Gabe, an unheard of thing. Like having sexual relations with Jesus Christ.

This mania within his thoughts and mental deeds, his wild sensations, were but a physical need, without the mental alternations that go hand in hand with adolescence. Rich and ripe and wanton with all the indeterminations of an ageless age, disarming candor and playfulness with sudden hardness, resolution and rigor with collapse. This quaintness was his rightful insignia, and he realized he must follow it, whatever the cost. And being so young, so callow,

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he never questioned its effects on his life, nor the aftermath of its maddening glow.

Inwardly, he expressed his needs and revolts in this single impulse, to partake of man, this virulent demand of his body, the adolescent individuality, his demand for a total life. And alone in his cabin at night it haunted him. Hunger gnawed, and visions poured down the dark inroads of his mind like an erotic parade.

He longed to open wide the gates of immortality with his own burning limbs, now ripe for the taking, the superhuman nature of the youthful hero, and he wondered forlornly why his father would not want to take him, or his mythical Tarzan, or any of the swarthy boys at school who naturally craved any manner of sexual relief.

If his own lusts were so strong, he reasoned frantically, then why didn't other men crave the same things he craved? Why didn't his father? He could not understand why he was obsessed with this burning hunger when other men, equally endowed with physical aptitudes as he, did not desire other men, their bodies, the way they looked without their clothes.

The first mistake he had ever made in any way connected to this was one summer at Marsh Island at a Boy Scout camp. He had occupied a lower bunk while a burly youth twice his size had selected the top birth. Gabe had eyed this boy on numerous occasions before. He was all beef and hamhock, and as broad in the shoulders as a barn door. His thighs too were huge, and the riot of soft curls on his head repeated themselves at his straddle. One night Gabe was seated on his bunk in the attitude of one writing letters home, a task he loathed. This boy came in, fresh from the showers. He fumbled with articles scattered out over his bunk, which placed his body, and crotch, within inches of Gabe's eyes. Gabe drank in, with one glance, his enormous prick and balls nestled in that patch of wild hair, and went faint. Here, ready for the taking, he thought, was all that he had truly craved from life. And with a gaze bordering on mysticism, he studied every vein that ran its length, the huge balls, like melons, hanging in their thin

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plastic-like sling, the smooth round thighs parted invitingly.

Abandoning all control, with the exception of his overwhelming hunger, he simply reached up and, as naturally as reaching for a coat or a hat on a peg, he grabbed hold of the boy's prick. At the touch, every vein and nerve burned their way to his brain, curdling his blood. That too rushed over him, turning him red.

But hardly had his fingers closed round the meaty rod than the boy flinched. With one deliberate retreat of his pelvis, he recoiled from Gabe's grip, and a moment more had Gabe by the nape of the neck and had him pulled to his feet.

"What made you do that?" the boy asked, his eyes wild and shiny, like hot glass.

Gabe could only stammer, so terrified he was.

The boy wheeled him round with one motion of his wrist and prodded him in the behind with a naked foot. Gabe went reeling across the room.

"You ever try to do that again, you little coon-ass punk," the boy warned, "and I'll report you to the scout master."

Gabe didn't need that warning. Thereafter, he made wide detours to avoid the boy, slipping into his bunk after the lamps were out, and counting every minute until summer camp was over. But that one simple touch had maddened him. It threatened to master him. But when he lay alone in the darkness and listened to the boy's quiet breathing above him, he saw rapturous pictures of the boy standing there before him, his meaty prick dangling for his enjoyment, and he would have the sudden obsession, while all wet with sweat, to rise from his bunk and climb that little wooden ladder to bliss.

Never had he wanted anything or anyone so much. Like the wild animal he had had a taste of blood, and never again would he be content to feed on the tasteless foods of the naturals, the straights. That mere touch had sent him on a wild trail that was to haunt him till the end of his days, and he would find pitfalls and obstacles and danger and violence in his uncanny pursuits. What he wanted was a dangerous

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thing, forbidden fruit from a forbidden tree . . . and all the more exciting and precious to him because it was forbidden.

And why should it be forbidden to him, he pondered? A prick and two balls springing from a nest of wild hair hung on every boy and man, as plentiful as peaches in the orchards, or shells on the beach, or fish in the streams. And if the land was so plentiful, then why were there not others who felt as he? Surely, he thought in a panic, he couldn't be the only male in the world who craved the male parts of other men. And what a craving that was—what an insatiable hunger . . . a hunger never filled!

But as yet . . . there were no takers. Men were as alien to him and his desires as if he were invisible. They came and went in his daily life, he eyed them and craved them and hungered for their nakedness, yet they moved inconsequential to his moods and longings. It was as if they spoke a language he could not understand, and them not understanding his. They desired women, pursued them, courted them, spent their leisure hours fawning and camping . . . while he haunted his every hour craving them.

Yet, because his strange desires manifested itself within his nature with such force, such compelling authority, his sexual starvations made him bold—fiercly bold.

He possessed an urge to demand from them their bodies to do with as he willed, to rape them if necessary . . . and he did rape them in his mind. The more aloof men became to him, the more he longed to strike out and take them by force.

This was his second mistake.

Like a starving animal seeking food, he cut a path through the alleyways of his community, always on the prowl. Somewhere, he felt, was another male who would husk his clothes for him, and give his body to him to do with as he pleased. He had to find that someone.

One evening after school the coach had delayed him on the football field to give him much needed instructions. Though Gabe was an apt pupil in athletics, his mooning

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presented a setback to his athletic progress. When the coach had finished, he was late going to the showers.

The shower house was a long shotgun house constructed of corrugated tin, and was located beneath a covey of live oaks on the watershed of the practice field.

When Gabe arrived at the showers, the other players had washed down and gone, with the exception of one. He was a new boy who had recently moved into the community from Ohio, and so far had made no real acquaintances. For one reason he was much taller and heavier than the other boys on the team (the French are always small), and he had an unforgivable accent—northern—which no Southerner could nor would accept directly.

Gabe had never given him ten minutes thought, only that he was big and burly, with a wild riot of wavy hair that tumbled in his eyes, and baggy clothes that had about them the shagginess of an Eskimo. He had cold, piercing gray eyes, like orbs of ice, and they could look through and beyond you, if you took enough time to hold his gaze. Most of the other boys feared him and, though Gabe did not fear him exactly, there was nothing about the boy which caused him to desire him.

But once those shaggy clothes were down, Gabe had different views. He had never seen a male quite so well-built and proportioned, on or off the screen, and at first he could not believe that those bulky, shabby clothes had concealed such alarming glory. It was like the unveiling of a marble statue; it was like folding back dead leaves to bring back into life the perfection of a long lost rose.

That the boy was a savage was obvious. His muscular torso was pelted with coarse wiry hair, and his arms and thick legs were as hairy as an ape's. A mat of hair, as thick and long as the hair on his head, ringed his maleness, and made his long sausage-shaped organ and balls a wild instrument of hunger and desire.

Gabe had to have him. It was as simple as that.

"Coach Theriot give you hell?" the boy asked, as Gabe, with hands that shook, began to take off his clothes and ready himself for a shower.

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"Nah!" Gabe answered, with a tremor to his voice, his gaze deliberately going over the boy's nakedness in a way which forced the boy to notice. "Just a briefing. C'est bon, I sure needed it. Been seeing too many movies (he saw every movie that came to town)."

"You're a quick kid," the boy said, stepping out of the shower and grabbing a towel. "I noticed that about you, right off. All you need is a little more weight and a little more thrust. But," he winked, "bet you get that too, in time. You got good meat on them bones, and good bones too . . . I can tell." He popped Gabe on the rump playfully with his towel. "What's your name, kid?"

Gabe told him, his gaze locking on his crotch. He had never seen a dick so big, unless it was on one of the Shetland ponies in the Barataria pasture.

"Guess you know mine . . . Abraham, like in Lincoln," he explained. "Reckon too you know everybody just pins Abe on me . . . Honest Abe they call me . . . guess you know that."

Gabe nodded, but he didn't know. The boy had never existed in his world until this moment. Now he threatened to dominate it, full blast.

The boy pointed to the running shower.

"It's all yours, Gabe . . . get the sweat off your balls." Unconsciously, his eyes scanned Gabe's crotch. He laughed softly. "You got a lot there in the breeding department, too," he added.

"You wouldn't come in last at a stud show yourself," Gabe said, looking boldly now, too bold. The boy noticed. A cloud passed between them, like a sinister shadow.

"Get around much?" Abe questioned, his head bowed, pretending to take note of his drying progress.

"How you mean?" Gabe answered with a question, his curiosity taking a natural turn.

"On the town, man," Abe came back tartly, rubbing his broad shoulders now with the towel in both hands, furbishing like a shoeshine boy with a shine cloth. His legs were neatly spread, and as he furbished back and forth with the towel, his prick swung like a pendulum. It seemed to

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swell under Gabe's steady gaze . . . or was it his imagination taking on a wish?

"I don't go out much," Gabe answered, almost apologetic.

"You mean you don't pick up girls—some of them cute French chicks down at the Pirate's Cove . . . fuck em?"

Gabe flushed.

"You missing something, man! Putting your rod in a hot hole is the best feeling on God's green earth—you take it from me." And he added coquettishly, fawning purposely, "Any hot hole, Gabe baby, any hot hole will do for me . . . and I mean . . . annnny hot hole!"

Gabe went crimson. He turned into the shower, as the cold water tended to soothe the fires within him. This boy was building up to something, he had sense enough to realize that, and the building was tearing down Gabe's reserves. Bold, he baited the boy.

"Bet you got plenty there . . . to put in a hole . . . when it's on a hard?"

"Well, I'm not bragging," Abe said, flashing two rows of white teeth, "but when I fill a hole up, there ain't enough room left to blow air in."

Gabe eased out of the shower and dried himself. His own prick was beginning to swell now, completely out of his control, and he saw that it was being observed. This sent wild tinglings through him, and his blood expanded so that he knew his face had turned a bright red.

Abe gave him a piercing gaze, then, allowing his hand to slide down his thigh, caught hold of his own prick lovingly and stripped it back slowly.

"Want to see mine on a hard?" he asked, his gaze glued to Gabe's. "Ain't nobody around . . . Hell, man, we're alone! I don't mind showing my hard to another guy."

"We'd better not," Gabe said reluctantly, holding on fast to his last thread of reserves.

"Chicken, man?"

"It's not that."

"What is it then? Notice you got on half a hard yourself. What you thinking about . . . some cunt?" His laugh was

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ridiculing, harsh, bitter.

Gabe felt the tang of it. The sound was like a crushing blow. It was enough in its own volume to warn him, but he was swept now upon a tide from which he could not descend. He knew he had to go on, wantingly, regardless of the danger, the price. After all, it seemed harmless enough.

The boy shook his enlarged prick invitingly, but hatefully. To Gabe, a babe in the woods, it was both a challenge and an invitation.

"Gabe, baby," the boy went on playfully, "you know damn well you'd like to see this thing I got rear up real big and mean. Now come on, what you say . . . wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't mind seeing it . . . on a hard," Gabe confessed.

The die was cast.

Now that his desires were in the open at last, expressed in words, Gabe could only stand by and wait, enthralled. He trembled in the wild ecstasy of one awaiting the gates to open to Heaven. He didn't have to wait long.

With a few full-length strokes, the boy's prick grew swiftly, swelling like a child's sausage balloon, and when he at last turned it loose and withdrew his hands wide for his audience, his prick slapped against his belly in a succession of meaty raps.

"You like what you see?" he asked Gabe, who had become all eyes and nerves.

Gabe let out a weak, "Yes."

"Want to feel it?"

He need not have invited.

Before Gabe realized what he was doing, he reached out and caught hold of the boy's prick. It was so huge and warm to his touch, to his clutching fingers, and throbbed like a wild bird panting to be set free. The loose foreskin was like flour dough in his fingers, and he stretched it back and forth the way he had seen Abe do it a moment ago, eyeing the huge head that mushroomed out like the plush skull of a cat. Each time he went up and down, his fingers buried themselves in the wild nest of hair, and it was animal rapture to watch the enormous balls swing to and fro like

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gourds in a sack.

"It ain't had no loving in a long time," Abe said, his gaze now like lights lit from within. His facial expression had taken on a mask-like appearance, almost frightful, nightmarish, and Gabe noticed how the veins along his arms and inner thighs stood out vividly in the late afternoon light. He was like a wild man, burning like coals, almost as if he was translucent, incandescent.

"It's a mean thing, Gabe," he went on, his voice low and guttural, responding to Gabe's working fingers in the sensitive areas. "But it likes its loving, baby, a good kiss. Would you kiss it, babe?"

Gabe surrendered like a man dropped to his knees in irons. He could no more help himself than slaves bound on sacrificial altars. On his knees in front of him, he reached up lovingly and caught hold of Abe's thick, muscular thighs and pulled his body to him. At the same time, as hungry as a starving animal for raw flesh, he opened his mouth and let the enormous, meaty, red head slip willingly in over his lolling tongue and between his teeth.

In that instant a wild unreasoning, a blocking out of his mind, ran a living flame through every portion of his being. Here was the thing for which he had always hungered. The meat, the rapt food for his body and soul. And he drank at it and slobbered at it, and sucked, like a child at its mother's tit. Suddenly he was in paradise. But just as suddenly he was hurled back to earth.

With one sure stroke, Abe's hand went quickly down to his own prick and he jerked it out of Gabe's wet mouth. The sound made a dull pop, like a cork pushed out of a bottle. Gabe looked up, startled. He was too much in ecstasy to be frightened. That would come a moment later.

"How much money you got, kid?" Abe asked, his expression cold now, spent of passion.

Gabe was too dumbfounded to answer.

"Bread, man! bread!" Abe spat, nervous, rubbing his thumb over his fingers. "If you wanta suck . . . you got to lay some bread on me, see!"

"Bread! Money . . . I don't have any money," Gabe

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answered, almost in a whisper, every nerve shattered.

"What?" Abe half-screamed. "Why you little louse! What did you think you let yourself in for? A free blow? Listen, man, I don't drop my load for free . . . savy . . . understand?" His hands were spread wide now in the age old gesture of appeal . . . or demand.

Gabe got up, like a man condemned to the gallows, freed, then condemned again. He was at a complete loss on what to think, on how to take this boy who had offered his body so lovingly, then as confusingly refused it—like so much bread tossed to starving hounds.

"I didn't know . . . you wanted money," Gabe spit out honestly, in frail defense.

Abe gave him a stern look.

"What did you take me for, kid . . . a queer?" He moved closer and shook a finger at Gabe. "Listen, dumb-bunny. I'm a hustler, understand? A male hustler . . . know what that is?"

With all sincerity Gabe didn't know. He shook his head.

"Well, I'm going to shock you a little." He breathed heavily. "I sell this gib money-maker, see. I sell it to fruits like you who want to lick on it bad enough they're willing to shell out some bread. I don't come cheap . . . twenty's my standard price. You got twenty?"

"No," Gabe stammered.

Abe went into a rage. Snatching up Gabe's slacks from the clothes rack, he gave the pockets the once-over. Then he jerked out his bill-fold and rummaged through the partitions. He withdrew two one-dollar bills.

"What you doing, fruity boy! Holding out on me?" He was in an uproar now, every muscle drawn taut, every nerve stretched to the point of breaking, like steel wires strung across a chasm. Like lightening, he slapped Gabe full across the face. The sound rang in the still gloom.

"Listen, smart boy," he said with ice in his voice. "I've had my dick sucked from every town between here and Brooklyn, see! I've had some good ones and some bad ones and some old ones and some young ones and some white ones and some black ones and they all pay for my stud

services, see? They all pay, for I ain't giving it away for nothing. I ain't gonna let some sick fruit slobber on my beautiful prick when I can stick it in the honey-hole of some slick chick, understand? Now, I'm going to rough you up a little just to teach you a lesson. Then, you shag-ass it outta here and cough up some loot. It you ain't got money then loot, man. A radio, maybe your hi-fi, some fancy duds, maybe. You got a car?"

Gabe shook his head. His mind was in a whirlwind.

"Answer . . . ME!"

"No."

"Okay . . . okay! You must have lost your cookie. You've signed your own death warrant, you know that, don't you, fruity pie?" He frowned, staring steadily at Gabe, as if his thoughts suddenly were a long way off. "You queers just won't ever learn, will you?"

"I'm not a . . . queer," Gabe said, finding courage to defend himself.

Abe laughed.

"You're not, huh? I guess I was mistaken. I just took it for granted that when you got down on your goddamned knees and started lapping up my big beautiful prick you was just naturally a cocksucker, see?"

"It's different . . . somehow," Gabe said truthfully, remembering in a flash his memories of Tarzan, the wonderful sight of his father in the showers, the strange and wondrous maleness—true maleness, of one man wanting and having another.

"That's what they all say," Abe said mockingly, letting out a little scary laugh. "I never met a fruit in my life that didn't say he wasn't queer once he got through licking a spermy prick. Well, Mr. Captain of the Football Team—you're a fruit all right . . . and I'm not gonna let you forget that ever . . . see?"

Abe never let him forget.

That evening he beat Gabe black and blue, cursed and beat and threatened until he had stumbled out of the shower house completely exhausted.

After that, whenever he saw Gabe at school, on the

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streets, or in a movie house, he approached him boldly and demanded money. Gabe became drained. He drew on his own meager savings, even robbed his and his sister's piggy banks, begged and borrowed from his parents . . . in order to have peace.

Now he was driven out of the Eden of his past, into the hell of his future. He was being pursued, rather than pursuing. In fact, he was being stalked, and by the very epitome of the form to which he had aspired to love. This beautiful creature was haunting him, making his life a living torment, a wretched hell, and there seemed no escape. For even when he was being threatened and tormented, his hungers still sought those thick, hairy limbs, those thighs opened so invitingly, the glory in the dark abodes of that savage crotch. He ran, but was pulled back like a magnet. He tried to flee, but at the same time was drawn into the realm of those dark arms, that broad chest, those cold eyes, that tumbling hair, that male smell, that haunting wild thing from which he could find no escape, no rest.

It was for this reason that he built the little cabin. He longed to escape from his tormentor, to exile him from the temptations, to seek havens once so known and so taken for granted, those days before Abe and his wild, savage powers.

Gabriel's cabin was both grotesque and beautiful. It was built of cypress logs taken out of the area and hewn into shape with patience and loving care. The roof, too, was of cypress, shingles cut into thin strips and weighted with stones and packed with moss. It set on a sandy island facing south, and the broad expanse of Dauterive Lake. There was but one door and one window, which Gabe had tugged on his back that three miles from his father's farm. On the outer walls he had nailed pieces of gray-white driftwood, deer antlers, seashells, and anything culled from the swamps he considered decorative. He constructed the cabin on spikes, in case of hurricanes and cyclones, so that the wind would pass beneath it and not through it to blow it down. And the entrance was gained by five creaky steps constructed from split logs. Nero had his peg outside the

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door to roost on. There was a barrel under one eave to catch drinking water. And there was a wide hearth made of gumbo clay, very much like the enormous hearths built into the old Southern cabins for slaves. The inside was simple. One huge room with a bed covered by pelts, a straight chair brought from the farm, a small kitchen table on which sat an oil lantern, utensils for cooking, and there was a turning rack over the hearth for boiling or making soups and jambalayas in the huge iron pot which hung from a hinged chain.

To Gabriel, in time, the cabin became not only his second home, but his haven. He delighted in it like a kid—for one reason that it had risen above the moss-laden horizon by his own deft hands, and that it was his own. The silence about the place was like music to his ears. He could lie on the pelted bunk at night, brimming with utter peace, and listen for hours to the sounds of the night: crickets, frogs, bobcats screaming, fish breaking water, the cry of the ibis, the tooting of owls, the lapping of the wind-driven waves around the little island. And it was a safe place from snakes. Snakes disliked crawling through sand, and though some of them dared to venture upon the shiny white sand banks, they usually went no further than two feet, then swirled back into the cool shallows. To the trunk of a cypress which stood on his island, Gabriel had nailed a homemade dovecote. It became a thing alive, with hundreds of pigeons swarming around it in their daily activity. Too, he made a small house for a pet coon. It romped about the place on a chain, and made little cuddly noises Gabe loved. And he had still another friend, a white hog, wild from the bayous, which insisted on making the cool shade beneath the cabin his permanent home.

Gabe used the cabin as often as he could get away from the farm, field labor, and school. It became his home, his retreat, his fort, his haven, the one secure place of exile to which he could flee from the unwanted, hectic world of St. Martinville, and people like Abe. Usually, each weekend found him there, always alone except for his pets, basking in the wilds of nature and his own private thoughts.

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This preoccupation with nature, this exiling himself to the bayous and swamps did not bring a source of alarm to his parents. On the contrary. Acadians were from a long line of hunters and trappers, migrating down to this lush country from Canada, and they saw nothing unnatural in their son keeping to the woods. He usually returned to the farm with an abundance of game, which helped greatly to fill their Acadian cuisines, and they preferred his occupation with the woods to that of running the streets like some of the other boys his age, splitting around in flashy souped-up cars, wild about the local girls.

And it was on one of these casual weekend retreats that Gabe met his Hephaestion, his Tarzan, a dream, stepping all wet and savage and wild from the confines of his imaginings, a flesh and blood counterpart.

It was on Friday evening about dusk. The sandpipers were out, feeding on choice worms around the cabin, when Gabe lumbered in for two days and nights of primitive peace. He was completely naked, his clothes crammed into an Army field pack on his back, his arrows slung, Nero quarrelsome on his shoulder.

Bringing in his pirogue silently (a small boat fashioned from a cypress log) he noticed a tall heron, as still as a statue on the mirror-like water, its reflection making a double image of primeval beauty in the reddening dusk. Leaning over the sides of the pirogue, he studied his own reflection. Many who lean over the water see only a vague, human image. But Gabe saw himself everywhere. The dullest planes could reflect his image. Even in others he could see himself . . . the narcissus which is the myth behind the hero.

Securing the pirogue at the landing, he went inside the cabin and built a fire in the hearth. Spring nights in the South are always cool, and he stood for a quiet moment before its steady blaze, gazing at his naked thighs, his maleness, his chest, as the broadening light from the hearth climbed up his form.

Then, from the distance, he heard suddenly the splashing of water.

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Peering through the opened door, he saw a rider on horseback, all black on scarlet, skirting the edge of the lake, his bulk framed against the crimson horizon.

"Must be Loreau the game warden," he muttered out loud, remembering that the man made his rounds weekly, and at times had stopped by his cabin for a brief chat and a hot cup of Louisiana coffee. But as the man and horse approached, and as Gabe studied the way he set his horse, his broad shoulders arched, the dip of his dashing, wide-brimmed hat, he knew it was not Loreau . . . but a complete stranger.

Unconscious of his own nakedness, he made his way down the creaky steps to greet him.

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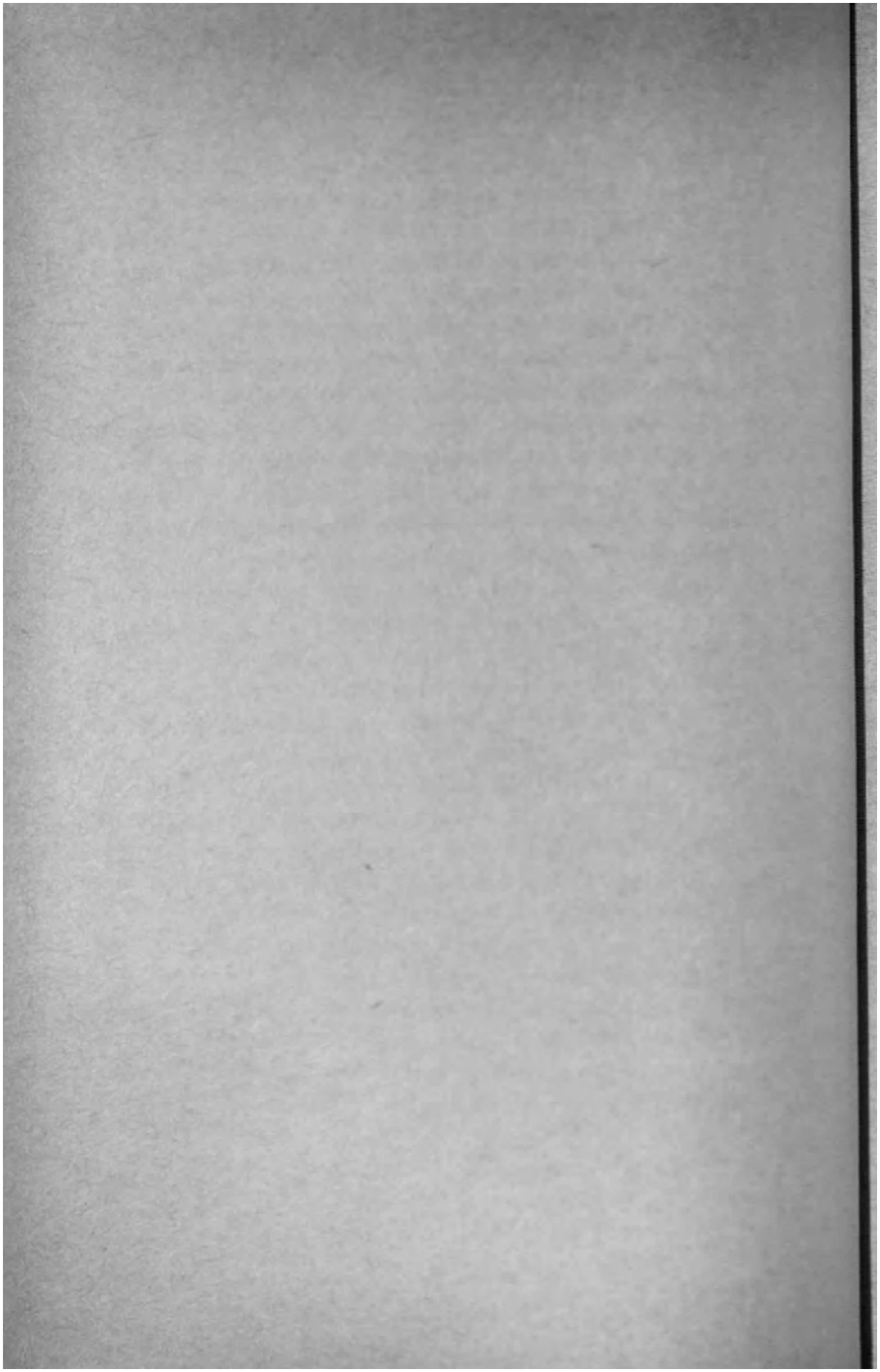

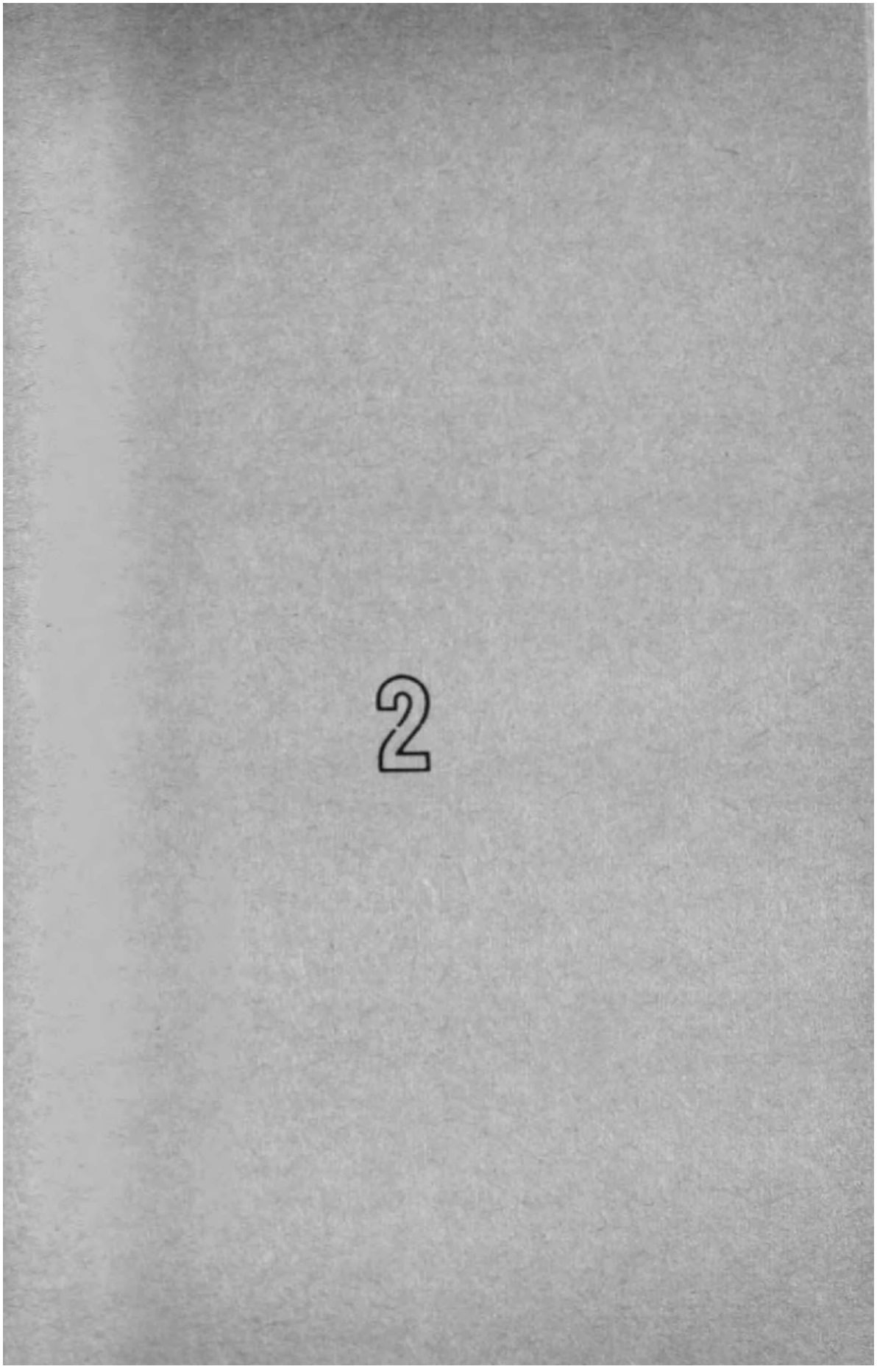
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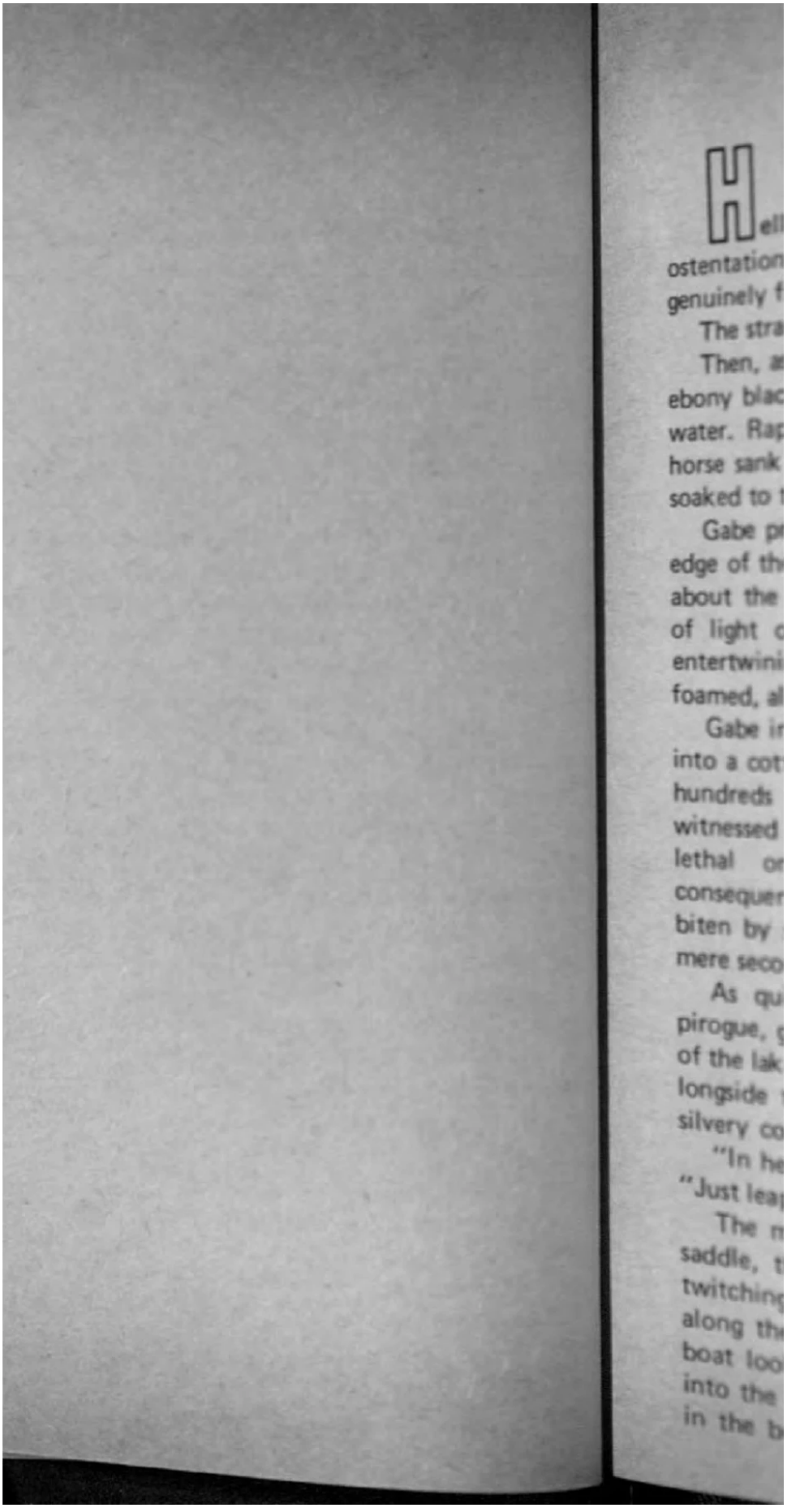

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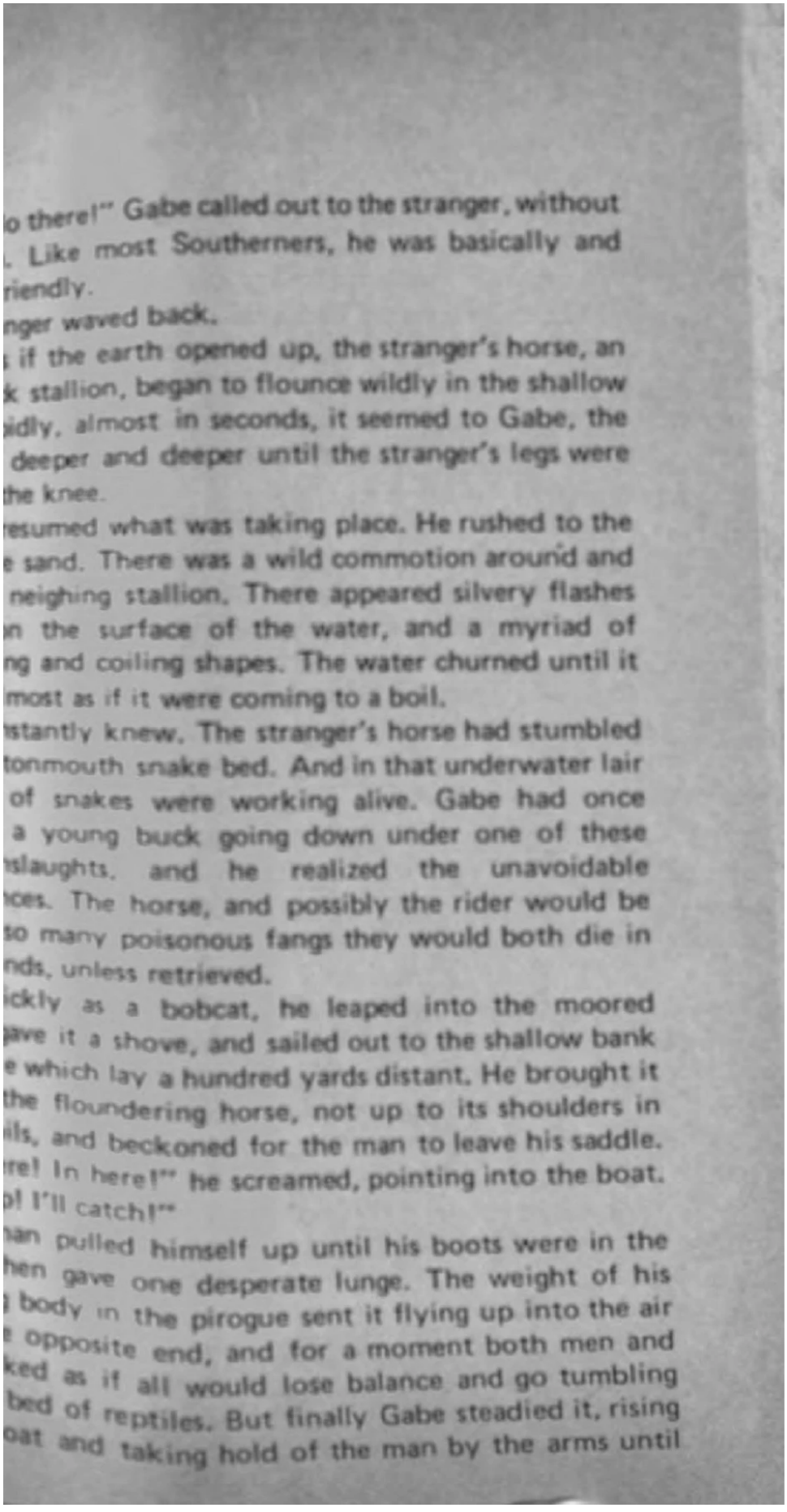

lo there!" Gabe called out to the stranger, without
. Like most Southerners, he was basically and
riendly.
nger waved back.
if the earth opened up, the stranger's horse, an
k stallion, began to flounce wildly in the shallow
idly, almost in seconds, it seemed to Gabe, the
deeper and deeper until the stranger's legs were
the knee.
esumed what was taking place. He rushed to the
e sand. There was a wild commotion around and
neighing stallion. There appeared silvery flashes
n the surface of the water, and a myriad of
ng and coiling shapes. The water churned until it
most as if it were coming to a boil.
stantly knew. The stranger's horse had stumbled
tonmouth snake bed. And in that underwater lair
of snakes were working alive. Gabe had once
a young buck going down under one of these
slaughts, and he realized the unavoidable
oes. The horse, and possibly the rider would be
so many poisonous fangs they would both die in
nds, unless retrieved.
ickly as a bobcat, he leaped into the moored
ave it a shove, and sailed out to the shallow bank
e which lay a hundred yards distant. He brought it
the floundering horse, not up to its shoulders in
ils, and beckoned for the man to leave his saddle.
re! In here!" he screamed, pointing into the boat.
p! I'll catch!"
an pulled himself up until his boots were in the
hen gave one desperate lunge. The weight of his
body in the pirogue sent it flying up into the air
opposite end, and for a moment both men and
ked as if all would lose balance and go tumbling
bed of reptiles. But finally Gabe steadied it, rising
oat and taking hold of the man by the arms until

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they could both sit down again. The man sprawled limply, instead of sitting, and the pirogue began to wobble back and forth again, galvanized by their uncertain weight and the churning of the horse's frantic body, which was sinking further and further into the slime.

With one mighty thrust of the paddle, in order to free the pirogue at last from the churning waves, Gabe brought it to shore in several long, graceful sweeps.

"Poor devil!" the man grunted weakly, as his eyes remained on his horse which now was submerged up to his neck and head.

"Nothing can save that horse now," Gabe said apprehensively, looking back over his shoulders at the awesome sight. He reined the pirogue into and against the little wharf, tied it securely, and beckoned for the stranger to get out.

"I'm afraid one of them got me . . . in the leg," the man cried, flinching as he made a brave attempt to lift himself out of the boat.

"Keep still . . . and calm," Gabe instructed, motioning with a hand, well-knowledged on the deadly ways of the swamps. "I'll get you out."

Taking the man's body by cupping his hands under his armpits, Gabe lifted him as if by slight of hand, pulled him easily from the dugout, onto the wharf and up the sandy incline to the cabin. At the steps, he picked him up into his arms, carried him into the cabin, and lay him slowly on the pelt-covered bed.

"Got to rip your uniform, mister," he warned, taking a knife from a urn on the table. "Got to get at that bite."

"What's a uniform," the man sneered shakily, "compared to a life?"

"That poison will spread over your whole body if I don't get it out," Gabe said, lifting the man's leg and ripping away his pants leg with the knife. He then took off his boot and sock and lifted his leg by the thigh until he could get a good look at the two neat teeth marks directly below the calf in his left leg. Deftly, and without saying a word, he took the tip end of the knife and cut a deep X over the

center of the fang markings. Then, leaning over the bed, he cupped his mouth over the red opening and began to suck. At intervals, he spit out the blood and venom, then resumed his sucking, siphoning until nothing but pure blood oozed freely from the wound. When he had washed out his mouth, he went to a little cabinet on the wall and took out a bottle with a large neck. He stuffed in a long strip of cloth, set it afire, then cupped the neck of the bottle over the wound. It stuck fast, as the smoke in the bottle sucked in the air. Slowly, blood anew leaked from the wound and into the bottle, a drop at a time.

"You sure know your business," the man praised, sitting up on his elbows and watching the procedures. "Or, at least you act like you do."

"Been treating snake bites since I was five," Gabe said, without bragging. "First my pet hound, then one of Mamamere's cows, then a coon, a horse or two, Grandpere . . . two or three times . . . he's always wanting to get bit I think, hoping to become immune."

The man tried to laugh.

"Not me! Hope this is my first and last. Those sharp fangs sinking into me gave me the creeps! Won't ever forget that!"

"You get used to it in the swamps. I used to be afraid of snakes. Not any more. They are as afraid of you as you are of them."

"I don't know. They scared hell out of me out there a moment ago. Didn't know what I was getting into." He frowned. "Poor Hercules . . . he's dead by now I suppose. Hopeless!"

Gabe glanced through the opened door and saw the horse which had somehow managed to wiggle free of the wreathing mire and was now laying on its side in the short grass, its hoofs pawing wildly at the soft mud banks.

"He's dying," he said, turning back to the man. "At least I can save your saddle and bridle and camping equipment . . . come morning."

The man's face flushed with a frown, and he lay back down wearily on the soft pelts.

"You mean I gotta be here all night?"

"You can't go out in this swamp at night, even if I went along," Gabe advised wisely. "You work up a sweat, and any venom left in your veins will poison you for certain."

The man gave a troubled sigh, turned his face to the little grimy window and looked out on the fast approaching night.

"Good God! Sure stumbled into a hell of a fix!"

Gabe gave him a startled look—not knowing actually what the man looked like, things had happened so fast.

"You better count your blessings, mister," he said, closing the door to block out the twilight chill.

"How you mean?"

"Good thing this happened in front of my cabin. Otherwise you'd be dead by now—lost forever in this here swamp."

The man put his hands behind his head and thought for a moment.

"You know, you're right. Too scared to think I guess. You have saved my life, and I appreciate it . . . hope you know that."

"Merci!"

"You live here?" the man asked, looking about the room.

"I live with my folks," Gabe told him, "about three miles from here, in St. Martinville. I just come here on weekends."

The man's expression changed from sadness to that of mild pleasantness.

"Then, I'm not so far from civilization after all, am I?"

Gabe shook his head. He examined the man's leg again, took away the bottle, tossed it into a galvanized can, and wiped away the excess blood. Then he gave the man a careful look, noticing the drops of sweat forming on his brow.

"I ought to help you out of your wet uniform. If you have one drop, just one drop of poison left in your system, you're going to get a high fever."

"Go ahead," the man said, braving a wry smile. "You're

the doc."

"Merci!"

With nervous fingers, Gabe began to disrobe the man, first unbuttoning his gray shirt collar. As he undressed the man, he questioned him about his uniform, which was unfamiliar to Gabe in this area.

"I'm a Preserve Scout," the man replied, shifting his shoulders so that Gabe could slip down his shirt. "We patrol the bird and game sanctuaries, Avery Island, the Paul Rainey Refuge, the Russell Sage Refuge and many of the other animal sanctuaries along the Gulf Coast."

Gabe unbuckled his wide black belt, and nervously unzipped his pants.

"On first sight I took you for a State Trooper. Your uniforms are almost alike."

The man let out a groan as he lifted his hips so that Gabe could pull down his pants.

"Well, they kinda do resemble each other—except for the hats. Ours are gray while theirs are deep blue, international blue I think, and they have a blue stripe down their pants leg where ours is yellow."

"Like a Confederate uniform."

"You hit the nail right on the head. Tourist attraction and all that. Makes them Yankees goggle-eyed."

"I think they're beautiful," Gabe said, pulling the pants down over the man's legs and folding them neatly on the back of the straight-backed chair. He picked up the hat and examined it: the band, the insignia, the chin strap, trying to engage his attention on something other than the man lying on his bunk with only his shorts on. He had stolen a glimpse while undressing him, glances here and there, and something about his robust physique had taken his breath. Unlike most of the Acadians in the Teche country of Louisiana, this man's complexion was frosty white, but the thick black curling hair on his chest, forearms and legs made up for his lack of coloring which Gabe had been used to, and his hard muscles accented themselves so vividly under the layer of spongy white skin that he maintained his ruggedness. Too, the veins running wild under that layer of

sensuous flesh added much to his maleness, the athletic quality which lent him a swarthiness deeply alluring and voluptuous.

"By the way," the man said, propping himself on his right elbow. "I haven't introduced myself. My name is Ruben Russo."

"Pleased to meet you," Gabe said shyly, despite all their intimacy, and he told him his.

"Straight out of the Old Testament, eh?" Ruben said, trying to smile, and his twinkling went over Gabe's body as if for the first time. "And you do look like something out of the Bible. Which reminds me. Do you always go around . . . er . . . buck-ass?"

Gabe blushed, yet was inwardly thrilled that this man had taken notice of his nakedness.

"I always do when I'm out here. Makes me feel free, like the birds and the animals."

"I could tell you was an animal lover, that back to nature bit," Ruben remarked, dragging his eyes from Gabe's body to articles about the room; a stuffed owl, deer antlers centered directly above the bed, a heron posed rigidly from a cypress root pedestal.

"Did you mount all these?"

"Yes," Gabe nodded, following the man's gaze. He could tell that he was intrigued. "But I'm not a professional taxidermist. Just play around with it, that's all."

"Well, Gabriel, they look like the results of a professional to me. You ought to try your luck with those men at L.S.U. in Baton Rouge. They turn out some beautiful cycloramas, you know, glassed in alcoves made up to look like natural settings for stuffed animals and birds."

"That's an idea," Gabe said, his black eyes shining like a doe's in the firelit room, as he stood, uninhibited, in his full male glory before this handsome stranger who had come out of nowhere to fill his evening with joy. "Don't know what I want to do yet."

"Finished high school?"

"This last semester."

"College?"

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"I don't know yet. Mamamere and Grandpere want me to go to Southwestern in Lafayette. But . . . but I want to enjoy my freedom for a while . . . just stay here and hunt, free."

"That all sounds wonderful," remarked Ruben with a smile, a smile that displayed the most beautiful, even, white teeth Gabe had ever seen. "But what about the service—Vietnam?"

Gabe's expression shifted to deep seriousness. He hated even the mention of war, and had always refused to listen to newscasts over TV or to read about it in the local papers.

With a pout he said, "I'll take it when it comes . . . like I do everything else. But I don't plan on enlisting—ever."

Ruben looked at him with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"You're not one of those objectors, are you?"

Gabe came back readily.

"No, sir. It's just that it's their war over there, and I am over here, thats all. Grandpere fought in the war, in the South Pacific, and it got him nothing, and we're still not free."

"I get your point," Ruben said gravely, lying back down and placing both hands behind his head. "I belong to the National Guard, and that's about it for me—two weeks training every summer, and assembly once a week. Guess I'm ready, if they ever need me."

Gabe, standing at the foot of the bunk, and with the innocence of a child, studied the man who lay stretched out before him. The sun had completely descended now, enshrouding the swamps in a blanket of deep darkness, and their only light was the fire in the hearth. Its flickering, shooting up in wild tongues of flame, lay shimmering patterns of golden light over the bed, over Ruben's body, and it gripped Gabe in awe.

"You remind me of Cheyenne Bodie on TV," he remarked, allowing his devouring gaze to run the length of Ruben's primrose body.

Ruben smiled a warm smile. "Flattery will get you anything, Gabriel. That guy's a real hunk of man."

"He doesn't have anything you haven't got," Gabe

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praised with genuine earnest, and he sized Ruben up in a swallowing glance. He did have the physique of the TV star, with the thick black hair growing wild on his body, deep black mats under his armpits, and on his saddle-hardened thighs and calves. Though his face was kinder, a little more sentimental, it was nonetheless as handsome and appealing. His hair was deep brown chestnut, almost auburn, parted on one side neatly and brushed smoothly down over his white brow. His eyes were of the palest blue, and when he smiled or laughed they sparkled, dazzled, as if quicksilver was being sprinkled into them. Above his top, shapely lip was a mustache, auburn as his hair, that curled on both ends Viking-style, giving to his ruggedness that beguiling attitude of adventure and daring, a swashbuckler or, as Gabe considered; like a character straight out of one of Cecil B. Demille's movies.

"Have you ridden all day?" Gabe asked meekly, daring to drag his eyes from the dark, beautiful body below him.

"Since daylight," Ruben said, letting out a tired sigh.

"Bet you're starving." He went to the hearth, swung the kettle on its iron hinge round and above the towering flames. "Got some crawfish bisque left."

As he bent over the hearth, reaching for a wooden spoon in which to stir the cuisine, his naked body bathed in the crimson flames, changing the flesh tones of his body into that of a statue cast from iron, Ruben remarked surprisingly; "You got a nice build yourself, Gabriel."

At this bit of flattery, which was a welcoming sign to Gabe, he rose and gazed fondly into Ruben's glowing eyes.

"Merci!" he said gaily.

"A regular Tarzan of the Apes."

Gabe chuckled.

"That's what my sister Mithra always calls me. She thinks I'm too filthy to come into the house."

"You're like something I've never seen before," Ruben went on with his valuable praise. "Way out here by yourself, in these snake-infested bayous, naked, like a savage. It don't make sense. I'd think a boy as good-looking and well-built as you would be out on the town, with a girl

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on each arm, not hybernating out here in this lonely end of hell."

"I like it here," Gabe said, quick to come to his own defense. "I don't cater to folks much. I love nature, the soil, animals, my freedom. Is that too much to ask of life?"

"No." Ruben looked abashed, as if he had spoken out of turn.

"We all seek our own privacy" Gabe went on defensively. "Well, this is mine . . . being by my lonesome. Folks are heartless. They're cruel—more beasts than real beasts."

Ruben turned over on his right side and gave Gabe a long curious look.

"Something in your past life must have been really bad to burn you with such bitterness."

"It's not that," Gabe tried to explain, the wooden spoon posed in midair. "I like folks—but mostly their thoughts. Like when reading about someone, like Alexander the Great, or Lawrence of Arabia. I like to read—even poetry—for you can get inside folks by reading about them. But with them they're so clannish, so stand-offish. You never get to know anyone these days, with everybody being so independent. Friends—nobody has any real close friends any more, just acquaintances, just hello's and good-bye's." He stooped, stirred the bisque. "That's why I love to come out here where it is silent," he went on, as if he was speaking to the wisdom of the flames and not Ruben Russo. "I feel things here, more than at home, among folks. I feel that voices are talking to me, that nature and I are kin. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Gabriel, I think I do—more perhaps than you realize," Ruben said with a sobering tone to his voice. "I'm a lot like you, in a way. There are times when I want to tear myself away from the city, concrete streets, people, tourists asking silly questions. Guess that's why I joined the Preserve Scouts—to get out, to break away."

Gabe rose from the hearth, the firelight wild over his dark nakedness, and gave Ruben a long, thoughtful look. Here at last, he mused silently, was someone who thought

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as he, who believed as he, and he instantly, with this assumption, gathered into his bosom the idea that they would become fast friends.

"I know everybody at school thinks me a kook," he said, as if apologizing for his condition. "But I don't care what they think. I live my life. They live theirs. Maybe I don't have much ambition. Maybe I don't want to go to college or to war, but I enjoy every minute in the bayous—like God made them especially for me—and I think what a man likes to do he should do, regardless."

"You're right," Ruben said, and with emphasis. "And I can admire you for this, Gabriel. It takes guts to be yourself. And that's what you're doing. You're being yourself." He paused, as they eyed each other through the bridge of darkness. "You and I are going to hit it off nicely, Gabriel."

"Merci," Gabe replied, as his lungs burst with pride. And in his mind he saw on the furry bunk not Ruben Russo, but Hephaestion, in the battle tent of Alexander. So dark, so grave, so wantonly beautiful.

Fires burned in his groin, and deep mysterious yearnings and emotions scattered throughout his veins, over his panting body and, to gear his thoughts otherwise, he filled a wooden bowl with the steaming hot crawfish bisque and carried it to the bed.

"Do you feel like feeding yourself?" he asked thoughtfully. "If not, I'd be glad to feed it to you."

"I do feel a little weak," Ruben answered, trying to sit up in bed. "Reckon some of that poison is still in me. But I believe I can manage. Thanks anyway."

He took the bowl and spoon and began to eat away, relishing the nourishment, while Gabe filled himself a bowl, came to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, facing Ruben.

"Bet the girls go for you," Ruben said between sips, making conversation.

"I don't take to girls much," Gabe was quick to reply. "All that dressing up to take them out—a lot of silly nonsense."

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Ruben laughed. "I was never much of a ladies man myself when I was goint to Baton Rouge High. While other boys were out having a ball, I'd be down at the lake feeding the ducks, or browsing the old fort on the Capitol grounds, or over to False River fishing. Funny, but I have always thought that a real man cared less whether he was with a woman or not. It's these pretty guys who have to keep proving they're men."

"Like Alvis in St. Martinville," Gabe said. "A hairdresser. He's always around a flock of giggling girls. I can take just so much, then I've got to take off."

"Back to your retreat . . . eh?" Ruben answered.

Gabe nodded, then supped away at his hot bisque.

When they had completed their meal, Gabe took their bowls and spoons and sat them on the table in the corner, and returned with two ripe apples which he shined on his naked flank. He handed one to Ruben, then, as an excuse to touch this warm person whose magnetism radiated around him like a spinning top, he examined the leg again, his fingers trembling as he caressed the area around the now swollen snake bite, as he ran his hands over the hard calf, through the wiry growth of hair that bristled and snapped at his lovable touch.

"I think I'll bandage it," he said to Ruben, going to the cabinet on the wall where he withdrew a metal firstaid kit. He returned to the bed and bandaged the leg with bright new gauze, holding it in place with tape. Noticing that Ruben's body was now drenched in sweat, he took a towel, dipped it in warm water which steamed over the fire, and wiped the sweat away, agonizing with sheer joy at the feel of the hard sinewy muscles beneath the damp cloth.

"You make a wonderful doctor," Ruben said, allowing his body to be handled as Gabe saw fit, a willing patient. "You have the hands of a surgeon."

"Merci."

When Gabe had finished rubbing down Ruben's body, glorified by each sensuous touch, the fire from Ruben's body tuned with his emotions, running from his veins into Gabes fingertips and up like lightening to his brain,

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registering the dark ferocious beauty of him, Gabe put the towel away and came to sit back down on the bed.

"I'm beginning to feel a bit chilled," Ruben said, hugging his own chest with his huge, heavily veined arms.

"You're getting a fever," Gabe surmised, and hastily pulled the fur blanket from beneath Ruben's body and spread it warmly over him.

"Let's turn in," Ruben suggested, his voice hardly above a whisper. He lay the half-eaten apple on the window sill, then balled his huge body up into a knot.

"I'll sleep in the chair," Gabe said apologetically, beginning to remove Ruben's uniform, carefully, as if they were holy relics.

"Nonsense!" Ruben cried, looking up from his dark covey of fur. "There's plenty of room." He lifted the pelt in indication.

Gladly, his heart pounding, Gabe slid in beside him. He had not bargained on getting so close to this savagely handsome man so readily and he moved as close to him as possible without looking overly anxious.

Ruben's right arm was stretched over the pillow and Gabe lay the hollow of his neck over his arm and, as he did so Ruben brought his arm up and encircled his bare shoulder.

"If I get affectionate in my sleep," Ruben whispered, his face intoxicatingly close," don't think anything of it, for my wife says I wallow on her all night long."

Wife!

A small treacherous bit of fire fled up Gabe's veins and nestled in his heart in a fit of jealousy. He hardly knew the man but, even now, so close to him, warmed by his warmth, he wanted them to belong, without another's intrusion.

So they lay silent then, Gabe thinking of the wonderful things about him, weakened by his great strength, imbalmed on his savage masculinity. Ruben seemed to cover his whole world, everything he had ever been, or would ever be, and most certainly, most completely his immediate present.

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The darkness drew on, the moon came out, flooded the little window, and the fire in the hearth ebbed, flickered, turned to glowing embers.

In his tortured sleep, wracked with fever, Ruben began to toss and turn. He pulled Gabe close, nestled him in his huge arms, threw one enormous thigh over Gabe's body, moaned, called out a woman's name that sounded like . . . *Nan! Nan!* His body became a sodden shape of fatigue and cold sweat, with Gabe in the midst of him, emprisoned in an entanglement of arms and legs, of chafing hair, and ponderous weight, and his breath heavy on his neck where, Ruben it seemed, insisted on resting his head.

Gabe gave up the idea of sleep in this wholly emersion of passion and fierce male beauty, male strength, basking in the hollows and planes of this man's Gargantuan body. In his joy, wrapped in this rapture of burning flesh, he became bold, let his hand slip down beneath the huge thigh thrown over his hip, felt the bulge and thrilled to the passion that slept there. His hand trembled in the nest of sweaty hair, and feeling the throbbing of Ruben's sex, he almost went faint in his arms.

He was as nothing to this persistent power, weak and cowed under this body of animal strength, and he dared not shut his eyes, though he had to labor to keep them open, in fear he might miss out on a movement, a beautiful turn of Ruben's body, a shift of his sweaty position which would hurl his nerves into rapture.

So he lay out the night, watched the stars through the little paned window, the path of the moon through the moss-laden cypress, enjoying the sensations in his own body covered by the wondrous body of Ruben, heard the owls and the mockingbirds singing to the light of the moon, and the frogs praying for rain, and the soft tapping of the waves on the little sand inlet, and considered himself already in paradise.

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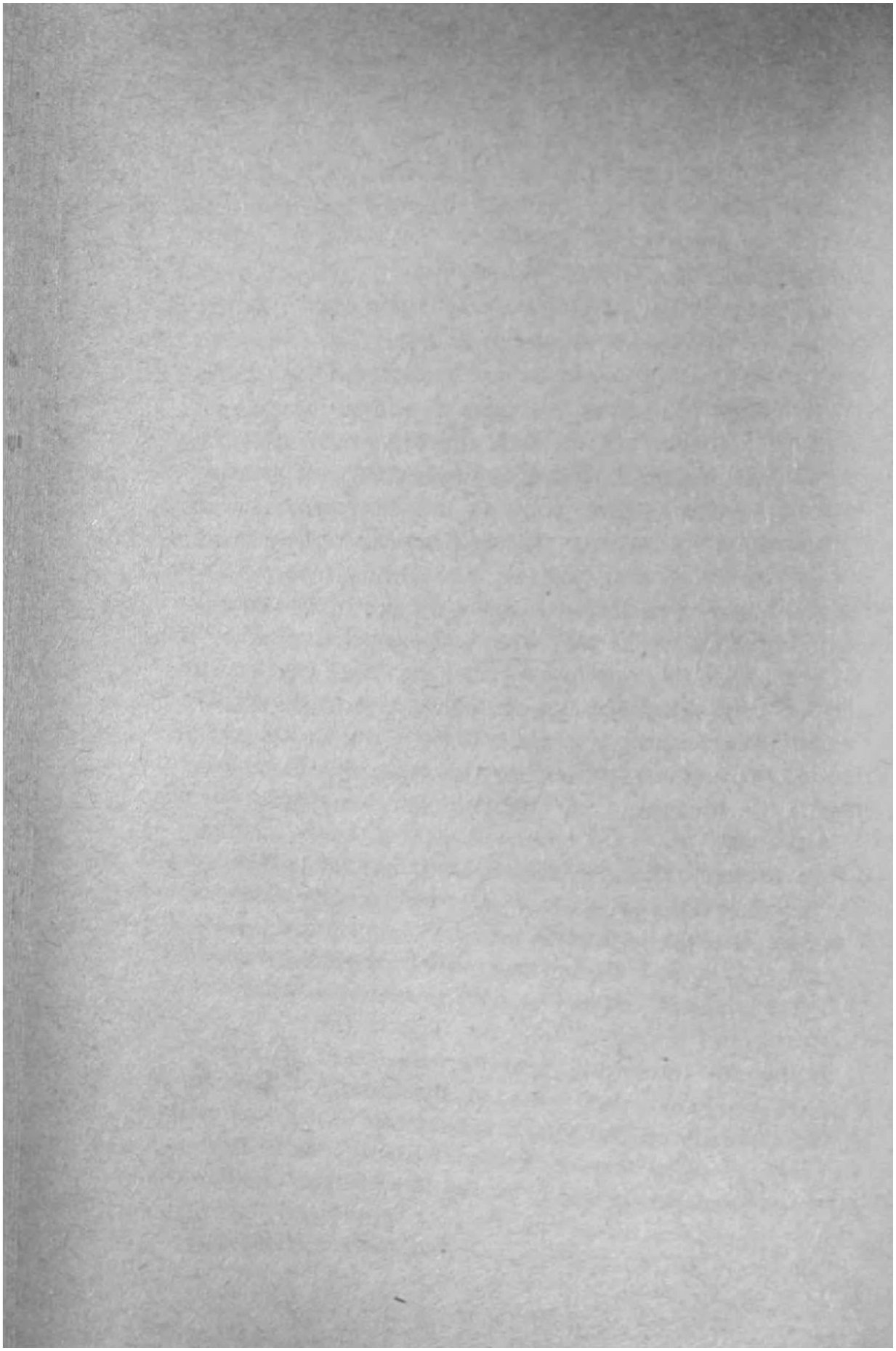

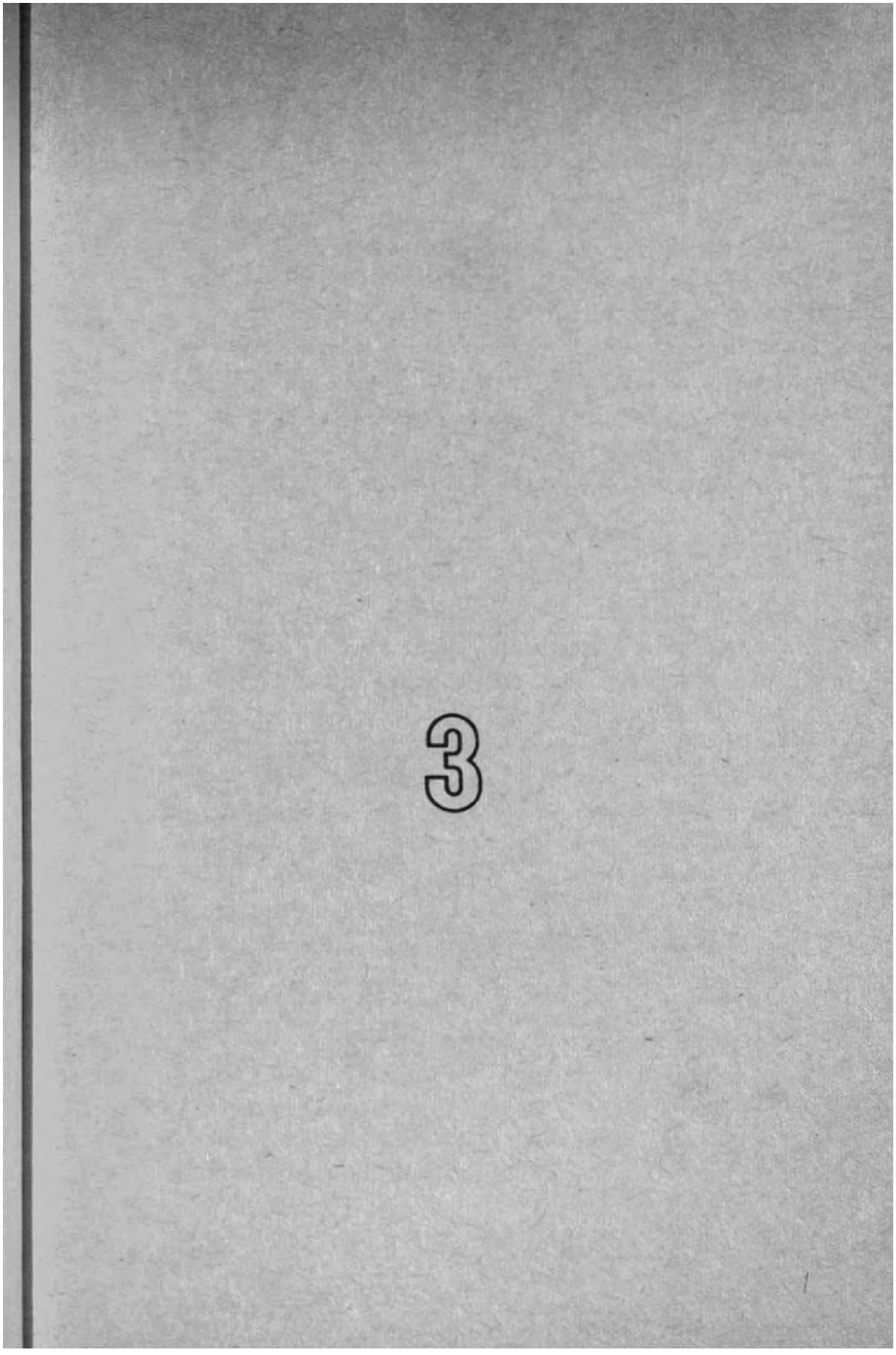
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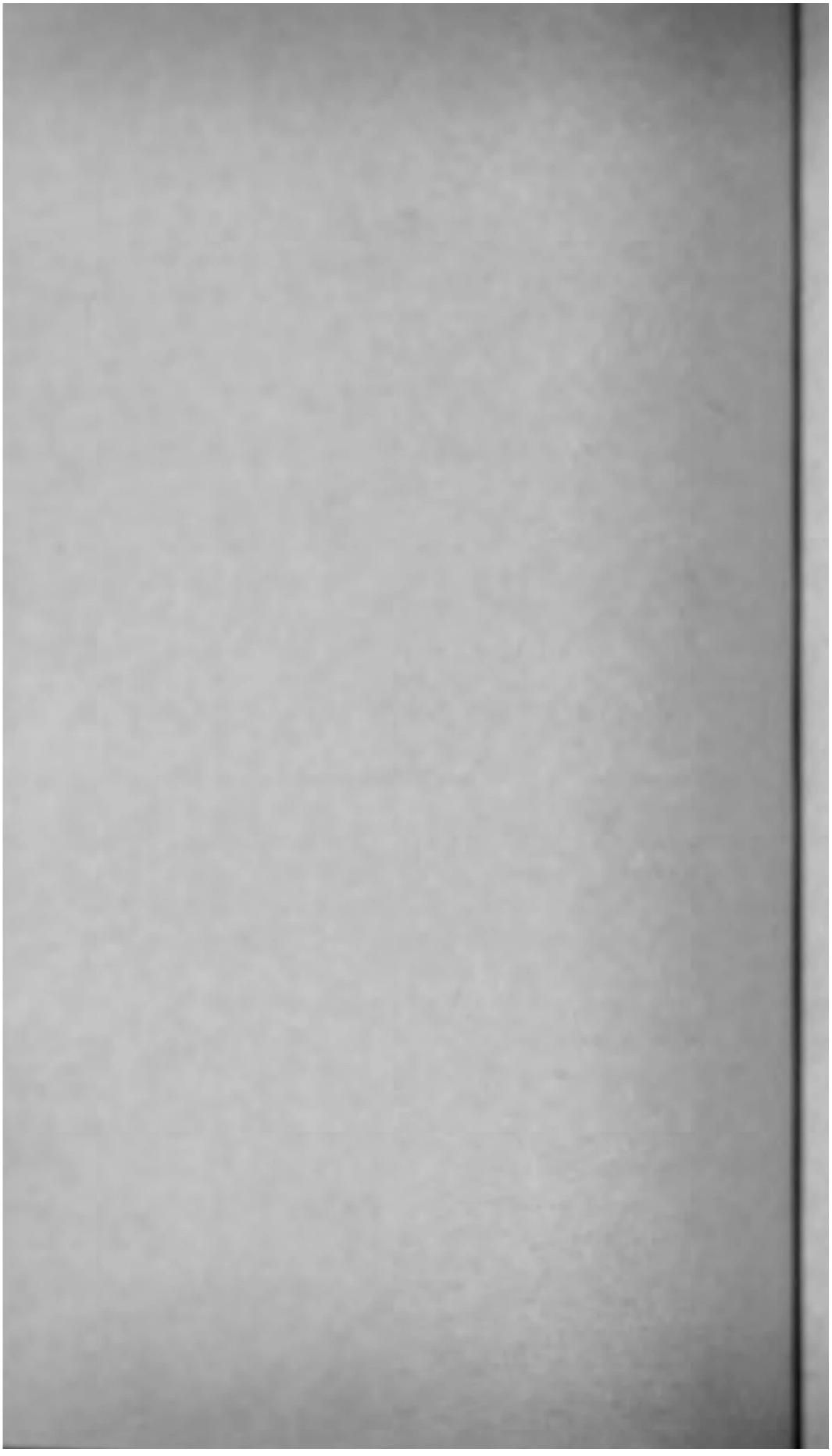

At the first amber streaks of dawn, Gabe slipped out of Ruben's arms and went to the hearth to put on a pot of coffee. He tiptoed back to the bed, studied Ruben's placid face by the faint light for a moment, then examined his leg. It was swollen and discolored, the putty-like flesh bulging over the bandage, so he took a knife and cut the bandage loose so that the circulation of blood could move more freely. But as he did so Ruben awakened and, lifting his head curiously, gave Gabe a puzzled look.

"How did you sleep?" Gabe asked quickly, not being able to get last night out of his thoughts.

"I died," Ruben answered, trying to sit up in bed. The light through the window fell on his naked chest, and he seemed darker somehow to Gabe than he had the night before—the black hair on his chest plates in coarse curling matts, but sensuous, not at all ape-like, which was common on most men with hairy chests.

"This bandage is cutting off the blood, so I'm removing it," Gabe informed him, eying his underthighs which bulged like ripe melons. "You had lots of fever last night."

"Did I bother you?"

"No," Gabe said, still elated from the memory of it. "I slept fine."

"I didn't even kick?"

"If you did I didn't notice, sir," Gabe said with a blush, his emotions brimming over thoughts of the huge thighs resting on his body.

"Gabriel . . . why don't you call me Ruben?" Ruben suggested, making an attempt at smoothing down his hair in front. "We're buddies now . . . huh?"

This brought a winning smile to Gabe's lips.

"I sure hope so . . . uh . . . Ruben."

"You're my guardian angel."

"Do you feel better this morning?" Gabe probed, attempting to ignore the title Ruben had bestowed upon him.

Ruben considered for a moment.

"I feel all right . . . thanks to you."

The coffee was ready, so Gabriel poured out two steaming cups and brought them to the bedside. He handed Ruben one of the cups, wishing all the while he could do a million little tasks like this for him, to wait on him hand and foot. And a treacherous wish slipped up his heart that Ruben would take long in convalescing.

Ruben tasted the coffee, licked his lips then looked down at his cup.

"What kind of coffee is this?"

"Doux comme L'amour," Gabe said. "Sweet as love."

Ruben glanced at him and smiled, then winced as a sharp pain ran up his leg.

"You sure keep abreast of your Cajun heritage, don't you?"

Gabe was watching the way the long black hairs fanned out under Ruben's armpits.

"I'm not Cajun, really," he explained. "I'm an Acadian."

"Aren't they one and the same?"

"Definitely not," Gabe answered emphatically.

Ruben laughed. "I shouldn't laugh. You're proud of your ancestry, and I like that about you. Me, I'm just French with a little Spanish spice sifted in."

"Creole then?"

"I just rightly don't know. But I guess that's what I am."

Gabe devoured his naked chest with hungry eyes.

"Whatever you are, you're sure a big hunk of it."

"And ready to go!"

They finished their coffee in silence. Outside, a mockingbird kept up its steady trill, and the fish began to break water, making little silvery darts in the brown waves.

"I'm going into St. Martinville for supplies," Gabe said, taking their empty cups and slipping into his tattered cutoff jeans and sneakers. "Can I bring you something back?"

Ruben's eyes leaped to vivid life. He tried to swing his naked legs off the bed but, finding it painful, decided to leave them where they were.

"When do you reckon I'll be up and going?"

"A week maybe, a day or two more or less."

"Would you call my wife and ask her to inform my Preserve unit in New Iberia?"

"Sure, anything," Gabe said gladly, unknowingly now his slave. He fumbled in his pack for a pencil and paper and handed it to Ruben. "Do you smoke? If you do I'll bring you some cigarettes."

"Thanks, Gabriel," Ruben beamed, jotting down his phone number. "I smoke a pipe sometimes, at night, when I'm watching TV."

Gabe slipped the empty haversack over his naked shoulders, let Nero climb on, and took up his cypress staff.

"I'll be back before dark, and bring something decent for us to eat."

"It's going to be a long day," Ruben said, a little crestfallen having to be left alone in the dreary cabin.

Gabe smiled to himself at that, feeling very wanted and proud. Already Ruben was betraying small signs that he liked him, and he needed a friend like this huge giant of a man, someone whom he could admire, look up to, a hero.

"Stay close," he advised, as he started for the door. He paused, gave Ruben a thoughtful gaze. "Don't try to walk. Stay off that leg."

Ruben pleased him with a radiant smile, nodded that he would, and Gabe was off, his cypress staff before him, feeling his way over the level stretches of the bayou like Moses crossing the Dead Sea, and with great intent and purpose. And because he was suddenly happy and bountiful with wonderful ideas and sensations, he sang while he hiked.

He lost no time getting into the outskirts of St. Martinville. He stopped by his father's farm only long enough to relate of Ruben's bad luck and to pick up some money from his kitty. He lingered in Fournet's Drug Store, which was banked with souvenirs, imported chinaware, and statutes of Evangeline, long enough to carefully select a leather pouch, a handsome pipe and honey-scented tobacco for Ruben, and extra gauze and bandaging tape. On his way back, passing St. Martin Catholic Church, he hurried in, made the sign of the cross, and stood for a moment before

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the painting of *St. Martin and the Beggar*, the work of Jean Francois Mouchet, and saw himself as St. Martin shielding Ruben with the warm cloak.

Back at the farm, he raided the kitchen, filling his Army haversack with a fruit jar crammed with puffed Irish potatoes, rice cooked with sausage, coffee grounds, sugar, wrapped up a number of crawfish patties, hot rice cakes, beef brisket, a loaf of French bread, and a bottle of Jamaica rum.

By dusk he was on his way back to the cabin on Dauterive Lake. As he hurried over the languid bayou glides, the low, dusk wind leveling the grass until it tossed and swayed like an angry sea, he thought: "beautiful as the land . . ." as Longfellow had written.

Once beyond his father's farmlands he paused, took off his jeans and sneakers. Then, naked, went on seemingly through the marshes without direction but, actually, with a sense of place that would have put man's mechanical instruments to shame.

That stately dusk evening, caparisoned in diamonds with hints of the dew later to come, full of the solemnity that perfect beauty wears, had come out of the emerald-green mists to shame the drab buildings of civilization, and to remind Gabriel of his new found happiness. Nature seemed up in arms for his enjoyment. The prairie lily had its moment, covered with white, and shining like glass in the bright green leaves. Pine orchids, all gold, like his mother's molds of butter, lined the uneven walks of water as he splashed through. Wild rice infiltrated the tall, swaying snake leaves, goat dandelions bowed their golden heads to him when he passed, and the honey locust and the tulip trees, sparingly among the level stretch of land and water, stood like proud leafless sentinels to guard him on this night, his most precious of nights.

Before him, spread like a dream, stood millions of mushrooms, like soft stepping stones above the placidity of the water. To Gabe, especially this night, when love dawned in his chest, nothing was like mushrooms, which were as clean as the Lord's supper, nothing more magical and holy

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than these silken, pink-lined mushrooms placed here in the bayous overnight by the fairies, or by God.

The fresh narcissi, wild and clean and free, eyed him in lavender silence, and their dewy golden eyelets seemed akin to Nero's and his own. The fragrance of spring florescence filled the bayou with wistful sadness, as he thought of Ruben . . . his Ruben . . . waiting for him in the cabin. There were no scents, he imagined, so tearful, so grievous, as the scents of the honeysuckle and the wild bergamot clustered ghostly by the dark swells of mud and water, and the wild alfalfa, like the frangrance of lilac, weighted with old dreams and fantasies, faintly reminiscent of mysterious lost ecstasy . . . the lost ecstasy certain to be his portion of . . . his own strange world . . . if he could never have Ruben.

The sandpipers, screaming frantically, sounded like the tides coming in on the coasts of faerie. And for an instant Gabe forgot his blessed, almost sacred destination, so much was he still like a child. He chased a fat bumblebee all across the emerald-green floor, one eager, fluffy, shining head after the other, he and the wild bee, like the two youngest citizens of paradise, circled in forever from bleak honeyless winters of ill contempt, from bleak honeyless hearts. Ahead was the epitome of his dreams, a flesh and blood Hephaestion!

Gabe sang with passion. The wail of the lost was in his voice, the lost that had found, like a hound that finds the scent of the fox and already tastes the ecstasy of the kill. Though he was young, untried, untested with the callowness of age, man, the dirty crassness of man's lusts, young and clean and fresh, he had in his origin hints still of the old dark heart of Earth, a past full of innumerable agonies, and in this heart he dwelt, and ever would, singing from its gloom as a bird sings from the frightful nightmare darkness of the swamp. His being was more full of echoes than the hearts of those that lived further from the soil, echoes like his feelings for Ruben, the echo of the haunting quest for male for male which is akin to the unknown cries of the huge beasts on the mountains, the sullen male aims

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of the creatures in the slime, the love call of the bitten.

And never had Gabe felt these hidden emotions so strongely as he did this beautiful dusk night as he made his way over the Earth that seemed to him in the bayous, not round, but as level as a desert; never had these hidden raptures so reared themselves to the surface of his vision, the utter reality of himself. And never had he devoured such craving thoughts before, nor looked upon this land with such a loving, roving eye; the meadow larks scurrying before him, like page boys dropping petals, the leopard frog he stopped to pick up and marvel at its human features, the sandhill crane posed like a monarch, unruffled, placid, eyeing him with a rosy eye, the anhinga spreading its water-soaked wings, fearless, defying his trespass, the whippoorwill already crying for its mate, the scissor-tailed flycatcher like a gorgeous bird of paradise taking the drabness out of the colorless swamps—colorless but never colorless, and the channel catfish nibbling at his naked feet, and the pumpkinseed sunfish racing like old golden coins from a pirates' overturned treasury chest, and the lazy wood Ibis gliding like flocks of dreambirds out of fantastic nightmare.

All moving swiftly with him as he crossed this lush countryside to where . . . Ruben!

It never occurred to him that Ruben would refuse him, or what he would do with him if he accepted, gave himself willingly over to him. All he considered in his frantic flight to the cabin was that Ruben would be waiting, and somehow for him and him alone. What Ruben's life had been before their meeting he was not certain, nor did he consider his ties, his wants—only that Ruben must want him, as he wanted Ruben.

Had he paused to consider that Ruben may not be like him, of his nature, that his purpose with him, his body, would run crossgrain to Ruben's ideals, his male hungers, he would have become horrified. Country pride and his instinctive aloofness to human reactions would have sent him cowing. But the fire that burned within him was too raging a flame for him to cool with reason or logic.

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So brimful with expectation, the world he would enter with Ruben if he so made the effort, in this bayou and wood, this wondrous spring night, he enjoyed it all so much that he stalked the mirrored lagoons in a mystical exaltation. Endowed with this new ambition, he took his own atmosphere with him wherever he went, and before his footsteps beauty blossomed and ugliness folded.

In his wild hurry, the green airy waters ran so far back into mystery that it seemed at any moment he would reach the horizon, where sunset stood on tiptoe, yet land and grass and water spread endlessly away and the cabin was nowhere in sight. Around and about him life played bountiful, adding to his deep heart feelings and his young joy. Even the loaded pack on his bare back did not hurt, for it was intended for Ruben. And to see the whole bayou landscape not only bright with spring flowers, but brimming over, was to him like watching ten thousand holy saints rapt in ecstasy, ten thousand children dancing in the wind.

The evening sky, tufted with clouds, was caught up in the night breeze, and they went with him. Everything to him seemed to be moving onward before him, beckoning for him to follow, onward to the cabin and Ruben, who would be there waiting for him when he arrived. And this notion stirred him, fed his passionate nature, made his limbs spring forward like a mechanical doll as he made mud trails through the shallow water laced with grass and blossom.

As he hurried on, his frantic, ambitious mind francifully conjuring pictures of him and Ruben, into the blowing wind from off the Gulf Coast, a wind sharp and stinging with salt, his dark wispy hair hung about his face forlornly. And his face now, his fixed expression, like an animal going to its long-sought mate, was carved in some fiercer mold than his face had ever been—carved, it appeared, out of dark, riven granite, tortured, grim and wild . . . yet . . . beautiful. And his eyes! Eyes starved and burning with the passion he considered yet to come.

In them lay his driven secret.

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Black; not velvet-black, but that rarer thing, clear lucent black, like moonlit ebony water in a cataract. Clear black, with the pupils like velvet, lashed heavily with coarse lashes, thickly and heavily browed now in the oncoming night, and much too sensuous for his young, innocent face.

Such was the savage—the anguished savage.

Soon, and with a bursting heart, as if its sudden pounding was trying to tear its way through his chest, he saw the cabin—a dark, lonely silhouette against the purple, cloud-studded sky. He saw too that Ruben had already lit the lantern, and the little window glowed warmly, as welcome as the dawning of new love.

Reaching the edge of Dauterive Lake, panting, out of breath, the heavy pack now at last beginning to sag, to cut into his shoulders, cutting off the flow of blood in his arms, he untied his little dugout canoe from its mooring, and slid across the lake as gracefully and as noiselessly as an eel.

At the wharf, he looped the rope over the cypress upright, and bounded up the rickety steps. He set Nero on his peg outside and went in. Noiseless, trackless as an Indian.

Ruben lay on the soft pelt coverings of the bunk, still clad in his glowing white briefs. He was asleep.

For a pensive, radiating moment, Gabe just stood there gazing down at him, his eyes filled with admiration and coming love, the love of the hero, the exaltation of being in the presence of somone greater, more comely than himself. And in the shadows of the lantern and the fire which gave off its pleasant warmth from the hearth, as he himself stood naked, wet to the knees from the bayou slush, dark and savage and filled with passion and grieving love, he looked very much like one of those hill men of some earlier race who had strayed into the trim residence of an elf.

When enough of his passions had been filled of Ruben's huge semi-naked body through his gaze, if that were possible, Gabriel awakened him.

"You could have slit my throat, and I would have died not knowing how," murmured Ruben, yawning like a child. "You sure know how to slip up on a guy."

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Gabe slipped out of his heavy canvas pack and lay it on the kitchen table.

"Brought enough grub to last us several days," he said proudly, eyeing Ruben to guage his reactions.

"I hate you doing all the work, makes me feel so useless."

"I like it," Gabe beamed, taking the food out of the pack. "I'll have us stirred up a hot meal in no time flat."

"Did you call my wife?"

"Oh, yes," Gabe said with a casual air, still uninterrupted from his work.

"What did she have to say?"

"She asked if you were all right."

A deep frown rutted Ruben's brow.

"That's Nan all right. Cool, iceburg Nan!"

"I told her to call the Preserve headquarters . . . like you told me."

"Thanks."

They were silent for a moment, the only sounds that of the fire in the hearth sizzling over the damp logs.

Ruben propped himself up on one elbow and watched for a tense second the busy activities of Gabe, halfheartedly taking mental inventory of the food he had brought.

Then he asked pensively, but seriously, "Did Nan say anything else . . . like how bad I was or something?"

Gabe poured the fruit jar of rice and sausage into the cooking pot and swung it over the fire.

He coughed.

"Well . . . er . . . Ruben, she did mention another woman."

"Another woman?"

Ruben was all ears.

"A woman called Lottie I think."

"Lottie!"

"Yes . . . she said . . ." Gabe bent over the fire so as to spare Ruben his own intrinsic gaze. "She said she hoped you were having a good time with Lottie."

"Well . . . damn her rotten soul to hell!" Ruben stormed, in a fit. His expression took on a kind of granite mask, and

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the glitter in his pale blue eyes dulled like slate.

"So she thinks I'm not somewhere shacked up with Lottie . . . good God!"

Gabe rose from the fire and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"You don't have to explain to me, Ruben. Honest. It's really none of my business."

"But I want to explain," Ruben yelled, his temper completely out of control, his face beet-red. "There's this girl in headquarters see, this Lottie, a secretary. Well, she and I go on our coffee breaks together, understand . . . that is . . . when I am around the office. Just casual friends. Well, one day . . ."

"You don't have to tell me, Ruben," Gabe interrupted.

"Well, one day," he went on, as if he had not heard, "she wanted me to drive her into New Iberia during her lunch hour—an emergency or something. Well, Nan, my wife, works at the Pelican Restaurant, a hostess there, and she saw us drive by through the front windows. Ever since she's been plaguing hell outta me about this girl. Thinks I shack up with her."

Gabe wanted to ask: *Do you?* but he knew he had no right. So he just stood there silently in front of the hearthfire, the gold light playing up his backside, turning his thighs and buttocks a deep amber bronze.

Ruben, his face a mixture of unhappiness and dread, tried to get out of bed.

"Which way do I go to get out of here?"

His hopes for the evening completely dashed, Gabe gave him a quick, unpredictable look.

"West, toward St. Martinville," he answered, pointing in that direction with his wooden spoon. "But you can't walk on that leg. You start that blood circulating, get heated up while walking, and you'll be flat on your back. Besides, even if I went along with you, it'd take us all night to find our way out of this swamp. Everything here looks alike at night, and it's over three miles to Grandpere's farm."

"Damn! What a fix I'm in!" Ruben cried, falling back on the bunk. "Stuck way out here and her thinking I'm having

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a ball with some cunt!"

Gabe fell back, disappointed at the sound of his voice, final, fatal, more than what they conveyed to him. Ruben hated this place, and this realization tore at his insides as nothing else could, or ever had. And he longed to do something or say something that would beguile him into wanting to stay . . . with him.

He went to the bed and stood over him.

"I explained everything to your wife—the snake bite, your horse, everything. Surely she believed me."

"I don't know, Gabriel. I appreciate what you tried to do, but women are a queer bunch. You tell them the truth and they won't believe you, but they'll believe a lie every time. Now take Nan; if you had called and said I was shacked up with Lottie, she would have swallowed that. Sometimes I think a goddamned woman wants to believe the worst about a man. Gripes hell outta me."

"But you aren't going to try and leave here, are you?" Gabe asked in deep seriousness, thinking of a million ways to keep him here in the cabin, safe, protected by his willing hands. "If you do, it'll just make matters worse, take you that much longer to get over this venom in your system."

"Nah, I guess not," he sighed, folding his arms behind his head." "Just have to put up with this shit until I'm able to shift on my own."

Gabe gave him a hurt look.

"Is it all that bad . . . staying here with me . . . I mean?"

This seemed to shake Ruben out of his stupor and, turning pale blue eyes on Gabe, eyes burning with consideration and visible affection, he pinched him lovingly on the thigh.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel," he murmured, his eyes twinkling now. "I didn't intend to sound off like that. Of course I like staying here. Like you, too, honest. I mean that. It's different. This meeting you, getting away from civilization for a while. It's just that—that if only Nan would use her head sometimes, be realistic."

"I understand," replied Gabe, his spirits lifting faintly under the spell of Ruben's voice. "We'll make the best of it.

Turn it into a vacation until you get well enough to travel. I'll whip us up a good hot meal, there's French bread and beef, and afterward we'll have some rum and you can smoke the pipe I brought you."

Ruben's eyes sparkled, and he smiled a warm, eager smile, his teeth like shells under the shadows of his mustache.

"Sure, Gabriel . . ." and his voice died. "Anything you say."

Gabe taxed his skill and turned out a savory meal which Ruben highly praised. Both men were famished, and they ate in mixed silence, only bits and phrases here and there to keep up a conversation. Gabe eyed him constantly while they ate, fearful that Ruben detested the place, and him along with it, so decidely different everything was compared to his life with his wife, and he dreaded the day that would take this handsome stranger out of his life forever. The mere thought tore at his heart, and with hungry, greedy eyes he watched Ruben, his body, his manner, his lovable personality with the intense gaze of a man watching a target. If he missed, he would lose the tournament. And he knew he would have to employ every guile, all his animal cunning, if he was to keep this man.

After the meal they had rum, and Ruben filled his new pipe and they sat by the firelight and talked. The warm light, playing over their exposed bodies, made them in the darkness of the little room stand out boldly in high relief, like wax figures in a museum. The eyes of the stuffed birds and animals glowed like live eyes, but friendly eyes from the remote, stygian shadows, and the pots and pans and cups gleamed redly, the fire fantastically reflecting its blaze in miniature on their shiny surfaces. The long strings of peppers flanking the hearth picked up the light like a thousand elf eyes peering at them from the darkness, and the pelt bunk lay invitingly warm, for the time to come when they would lay together side by side, and Gabe would count the seconds and the hours toward the time when, dreadfully, he would have and see his gallant Hephaestion no more.

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The hours moved on toward midnight, and they still sat before the comfortable fire telling of rural things. And the more Ruben talked, retelling his school years, his work, his marriage, the more his presence seeped into Gabe's mind, his heart. And by the time they both yawned and stretched and rose for bed, Gabe felt that he could not endure life, not even a single day, without this wonderful man beside him, sharing a part.

He wanted to own Ruben, the whole of the man, body and soul, to enslave him yet become his slave, and he wished that God had gifted him with all the essentials to hold him . . . forever.

He obediently, lovingly, helped Ruben into bed, spread the pelt quilt over him and climbed in beside him. Their bodies molded together, where there was a sunken place in the middle of the bunk, and Ruben, primed on the intoxicating rum, pulled Gabe to him, as if chilled, and they lay thusly for a timeless time, Gabe barely breathing, his whole body trembling in the sweet ecstasy of Ruben's burning, glowing frame.

Outside, the wild kingdom lived on, slept, watched with one eye cocked for the enemy, buried themselves in thicket and hovel, cried to the moon and shrieked when dark shapes loomed, but there, inside the cabin, was complete, primeval paradise.

"I want him for my very own," Gabriel prayed to his invisible God, glorified in Ruben's heavy, burning arms, his muscular thighs resting above his thighs, sublime in the presence of this savage who slept so contentedly beside him, who breathed on his upturned face like a God himself, the warm flow of his breath filled with the fragrance of tobacco and rum and that of male.

Boldly, Gabe let his hand slid down Ruben's rising and falling stomach, down along his shorts where his maleness coiled so radiantly in the deep buried hollow of his thighs. He took hold of its limpness, fondled it lovingly, carefully, felt it swell under the power of his hot, vibrating fingers. He went limp at the feel, and in so doing, allowed his hand to wander, let his fingers gyrate up and down the long bony

stem, tighten.

"Don't," Ruben murmured sleepily, taking Gabe's hand and shoving it away.

Sick with sudden and thorough guilt, Gabe lay panting, hardly able to catch his breath.

He had ruined everything!

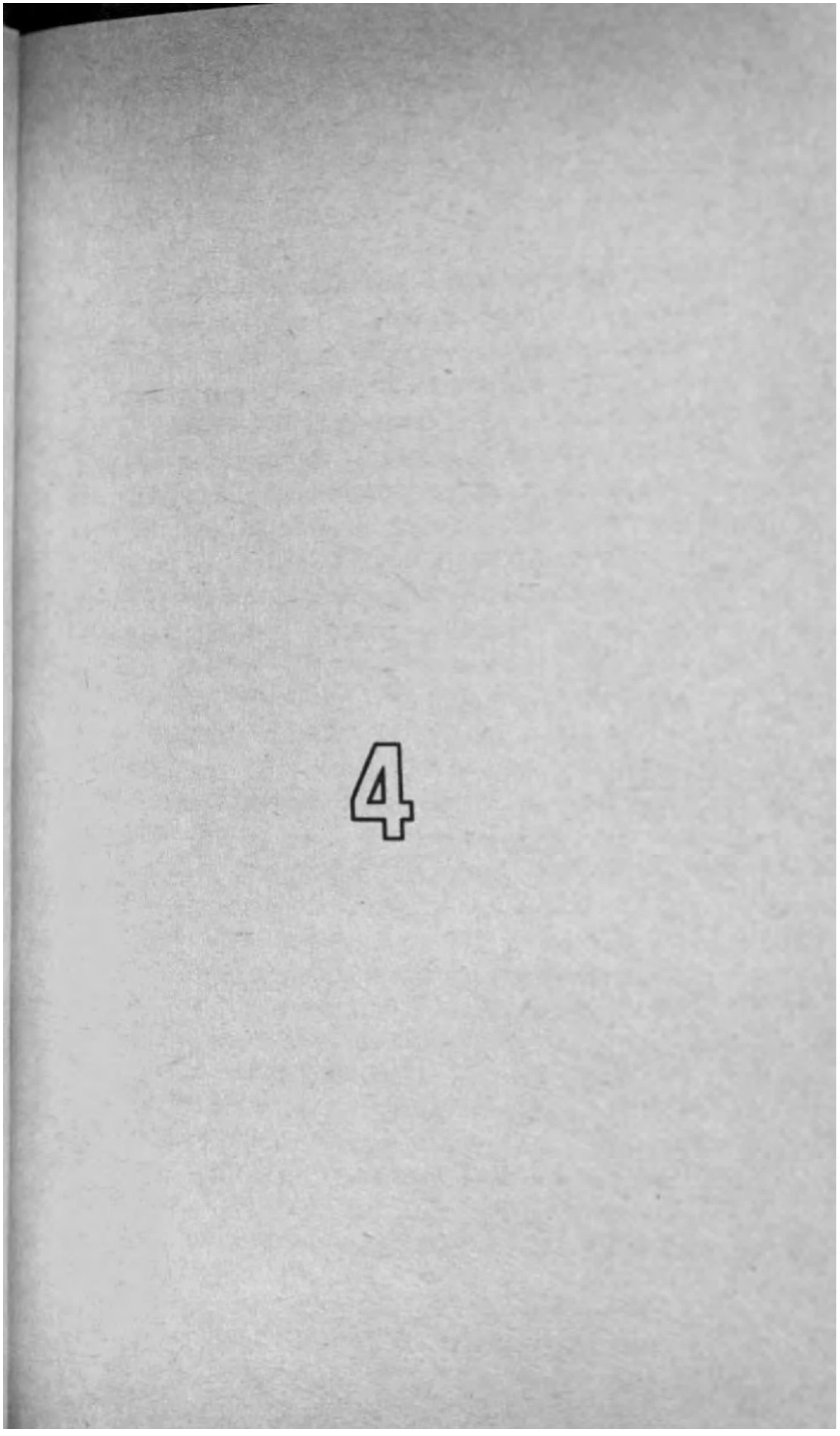
But, after a while of self-torment, he lay and thought how base and carnal he was. This sapped his strength a little, and by lowering his vitality and making his passion less physical, less throbbing, life came into better focus, and brought back his peace. Weary of his long journey over the bayous, he dozed, then slept.

But he awakened a little before dawn, noticed the first lights creeping up the night sky, and again his guilt returned to haunt him. But something else was wrong!

What was it?

He moved his body, felt nothing. Then he looked up quickly, as a sudden roar tore its way through his pounding heart, screamed in his ringing ears, struck him dumb.

Ruben Russo was gone!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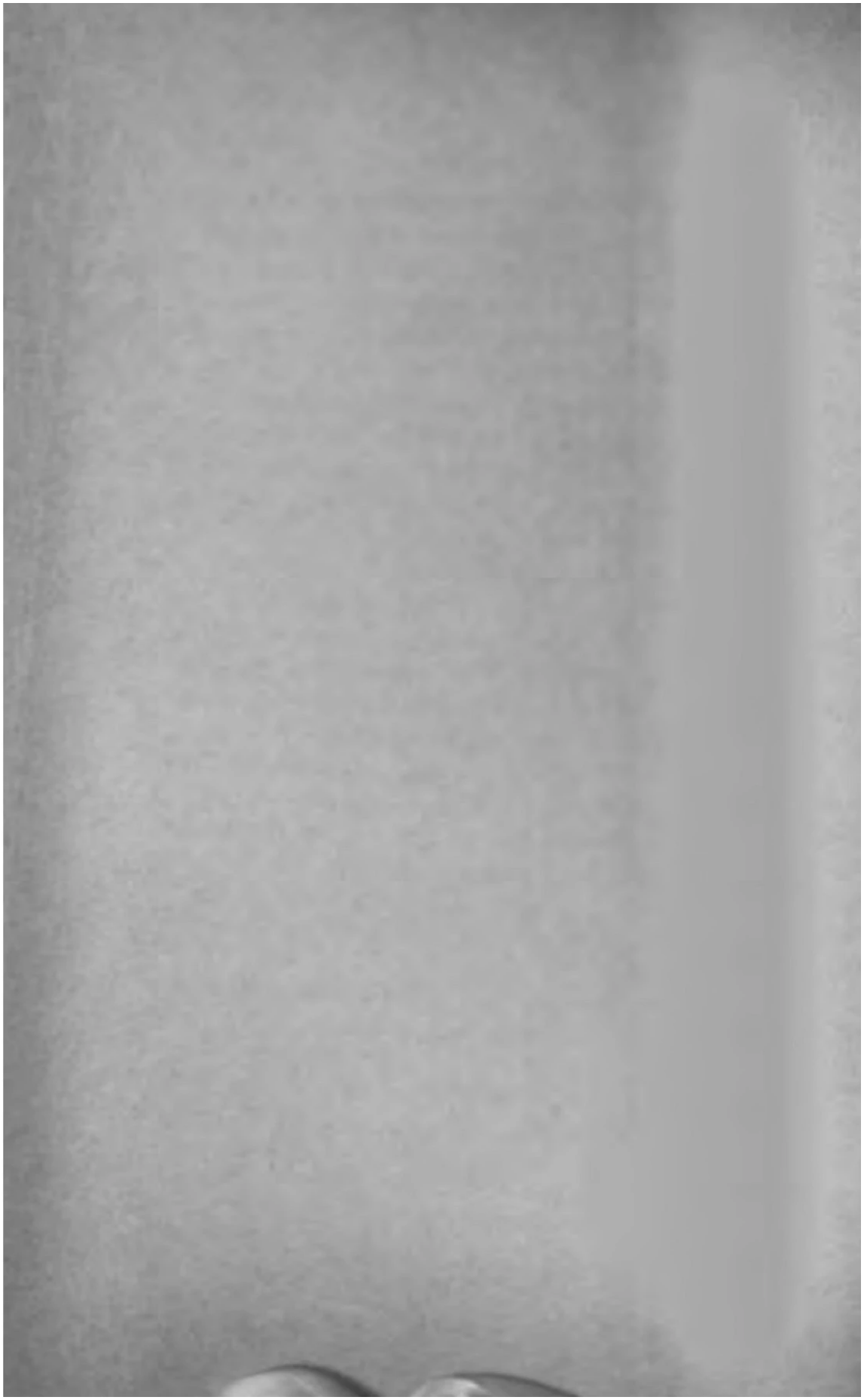

Leaping out of bed, Gabe ran to the door, hopeful of finding Ruben seated out on the steps, or down at the pier sunning. But the empty, forlornness of the two locations made him fall back in fear and disappointment.

Running down the rickety steps and out onto the sandy atoll, he flew around the cabin in a wild search, upsetting the pigeons in the dovecote, their shadows fiercely multiplying their number on the gray walls of the shack, startled his wild hog from its mud bed beneath the house and, as he raced past, awoke his drowsy-eyed coon with a shout.

Ruben was gone . . . nowhere to be seen!

At the realization, he all but panicked. He knew the bayous by heart, had known them since infancy, and he was certain no man could find his way through them alone—not even a man like Ruben Russo, and especially with a snake bite, his body infiltrated with poison.

Frantically, he retraced his steps, glanced out over Dauterive Lake, saw nothing there but gray water rippling in over the stubble and cypress roots. Going to the wharf, he saw that the little dugout was missing from the mooring stump. It lay on the opposite shore, shoved up into a crevice of mud where Ruben had left it, to go wandering off across the treacherous bayou.

Returning sadly to the cabin, he packed his haversack with food rations and necessary supplies: a knife, rope, firstaid kit, and Ruben's pipe and tobacco he had abandoned so carelessly. Then he took a sleeping bag from the wall, rolled it military fashion, and buckled it around the sides of the haversack.

Without bothering to eat, he grabbed up his cypress staff, set the greedy, quarrelsome hawk on his shoulder and started out to find Ruben and bring him back . . . if it wasn't too late!

Though the little dugout lay on the opposite shore, beyond his reach, he knew another way around, though much longer and far more treacherous, and he took it

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without question. A half hour later, after blazing his way through a labryinth of cypress trees and vines webbed with moss, he came to where the boat was moored and took up Ruben's trail.

It led seemingly westward, firstly along the trail he had used so often to enter the swamps, but then it veered northerly, and toward the great wooded area of Longfellow Evangeline State Park. There, Gabe was certain Ruben would become lost, perhaps becomming trapped in its endless chasms of vine and cypress, bitten again by wreathing snakes, and he hurried his pace.

Ruben's spoor was easy to ascertain. He was not a man of the swamps, as was Gabe, and he did not bother to cover his trail. Footprints, sunken at least a foot in the soft mud, yet remained, only partially refilling with water, and over the more subtle areas, mud streamers were left where he had dragged his sore leg.

There were other telltale marks which made it easy for Gabe to follow: twigs broken, leaves stripped from limbs by his hasty tread, petals of delicate woods flowers shedded from the rush of his booted feet, his bodily excretions, the grass pressed into the soft earth where he had sat to rest, a bit of torn cloth from his uniform, the seeds of berries he had eaten, a twig he had chewed.

By noon Gabe reached the southern rim of Catahoula Lake, just a few miles from the town of Butte La Rose. Still no Ruben Russo. And he wondered frantically if someone else had discovered him and taken him by boat into one of the nearby towns for medication. At the possibility, a hollowness fell in his heart, for he wanted to locate him himself, to take him back to the cabin, his retreat, and doctor him back to health, to keep him in his company for as long as he could possibly manage it.

In his delirious search, he thought of what he had tried to do to Ruben the night before, and he concluded many times that perhaps Ruben had left the cabin and him for that precise reason, risking his own life in order to get as far away from him as possible.

Each time he thought of this, running desperately from

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one spoor to the next, shame assaulted his senses and he wondered if he would have the courage to face him, should he finally locate him and come face to face with him in this awesome swamp. Once, in his guilt and delirium, he started to turn back toward the cabin, or toward St. Martinville and home, but the sharp memory of Ruben, his power, his body, drove him determinedly on. Too, he noticed a change in Ruben's trail. It gradually veered inward, going northeast, then gradually south, as if in an attempt to find his way back to him and the cabin. This spurred Gabe with added zest, and in his feverish mind, warped already by the forceful image of Ruben, he thought that Ruben was trying to find his way . . . not to the cabin and safety primarily . . . but to him!

The magnetism of his wayward pull, his crazed desire for this deeply masculine man, intensified by his wild search through the steaming swamps, magnified the illusion in his mind that Ruben, instinctively, wanted him as desperately, as thoroughly, as he wanted Ruben. His own desire ran so strong and so overwhelmingly through him he automatically reasoned that such a desire ran through Ruben.

Noting the change in the course of the trail, he assumed, and with a quick gladdening of the heart, that Ruben was doubling back to him, and this tripled his desperation to find him, to bring him to safety under his own young powers . . . a living and breathing spoil for his perverted cravings.

From island of grass to island he went, skipping unprotectedly through the shallow inlets of muddy water, in and out among the skimpy wooded areas and into deeply shadowed forests, dark, damp, where even at highest noon they took on the shadowy hues of dusk, following Ruben's trail like an experienced bloodhound.

Knowing now, or believing, that Ruben had tried, and was still trying to reach him, telescoped his will to save him for himself. Like an animal now, a little ferocious, fearless, relying freely on his masterful sense of direction, he slipped through the marsh fields like a phantom. With him, as an

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army, went droves of sandpipers, blackening the sky, and Ibis and Curlew fed on soft spongy banks as if awaiting his heralded arrival. Nutria went before him like tuffed page boys, and hints of the blue goose, ghost white fluffs in the distance, quacked repeatedly at his sounds, so much like trumpets in the invading Gulf winds.

At the first waning canvas of twilight he came to the great forest fronting Atchafalaya River and, as he entered, a pelting of rain began to fall. Firstly, as if only hints of rain, silvery, diamond-like drops hit the tops of the emerald-green leaves, making them quiver, then in long slanting silver lines, and then with a roar in the high, loftly ceiling of the woods. Within, where soft shadows lay like night, there was no rain, only the sounds of it, the music of rain, tranquil, melancholy, and there Gabe found him, a muddy heap leaning up against a shadowy, moss-laden cypress.

As a twig broke beneath Gabe's bare foot, Ruben glanced up, saw him and, with a sheepish look on his face said, "Okay . . . so I'm a damned fool!"

With gladness flooding through his heart at finding him at last, Gabe was too overcome to say anything at first. He just stood there in the damp shadows thickened with mold and mildew and gazed down at him, disbelieving his eyes. Then, without saying a word, he took off his heavy pack, knelt before him, and examined his leg.

"A fool's trick," he said at last, hating to scold him as he took agonizing mental notes of the pain in his startled blue eyes, the hurt look about his expression, the painful twist of his lower lip, as he gazed up at him from his shadowy stage. "Your leg's in bad shape. Swelled twice its size. Where were you going?"

Ruben scratched his head, glanced wearily away, as if a child caught in a naughty act and cowed under the penalty.

"Hell! I don't know. Home I reckon. Nan! Get that settled with Nan and Lottie."

At the sound of his wife's name, and the way Ruben said it, Gabe shot him a look of irritation.

"That could have waited," he said with a tinge of

bitterness. "This leg comes first . . . your health."

"I know," Ruben said with a disgusted look. "A man will do fool things over a woman. I guess I went slap crazy."

"Well, this wild goose chase hasn't done you any good," Gabe said, pressing his hard fingers into the spongy flesh directly around the snake bite. "You overshot your mark, Ruben. You're a long ways from St. Martinville or New Iberia."

Ruben glanced at him sideways.

"Don't make me guess. Tell me?"

Gabe explained their position in relation to St. Martinville, deliberately making it sound a little worse than it was, for he wanted Ruben to believe that they were further from any medical aid than they were. Though he realized this was both cruel and selfish, he could not give him over to civilization.

"Well, go ahead and chew my ass out," said Ruben, feigning a grin. "I know I deserve it."

"I'm only concerned about your leg, your health," said Gabe politely, trying to sound like the good Samaritan, blanding over with his true concern, his desire for this man, with plausible cunning. "We're a long way from a doctor, and your leg needs attention."

Ruben's expression clouded into a mask of genuine worry.

"Is it really that bad?"

"Well, you've been on it all day for one thing. Hiking in this hot sun, your blood has risen in temperature, and I am sure your whole system is infiltrated with snake venom. You should never have tried to get out of here. Even a well man would have a hell of a rough time if he didn't know the way."

"I've put you in a spot," Ruben grunted, shifting his position as he leaned his head up against the tree. "I didn't mean to do this, making you go to all this trouble . . . I hope you believe that."

"It's all right," Gabe replied, his heart racing at the thought of Ruben concerning himself over him. "I'll do

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everything I can for you. I've brought along plenty of supplies. We'll bed down here for the night." His voice trembled at these last words, and he kept his eyes diverted, as if attentive to his swollen leg. Actually, he considered himself the luckiest of men, and blessed this opportunity to do things for Ruben.

"You're a godsend, boy," Ruben said, his voice but a murmur, like the language of the rain. "I'm going to repay you someday, coming to the aid of such a fool!"

Gabe glanced up at him with deep and fathomless admiration in his eyes.

He then dropped his gaze.

"Being with someone like you, Ruben, is payment enough. Honest. I mean that." His hands fumbled, as he reached for his pack and withdrew the firstaid kit. "I don't have many friends. And I consider you my friend."

Ruben rumpled his hair.

"We're the best of friends, Gabriel," he said, without a sense of lavish praise. "It's not many people who would go out of their way like you did today. You're tops in my book, and I'm not going to ever let you forget it."

Baptized in the golden flush of these welcomed words, Gabe lifted his eyes and fixed them firmly on Ruben's pale, weary face.

"Can I ask you something, Ruben?"

"Ask . . . and it shall be given," Ruben answered with a smile, a smile that camouflaged his inner pain and made him look refreshed and younger than his years.

"Were . . . were you trying to find your way back to the cabin . . . and me?"

There was silence for a moment; only the sounds of the muffled raindrops amid the lush green, their soft spatters on the damp leaves of the forest floor. Gabe flushed as he waited for an answer, engulfed with the belief that his question had been too abrupt and out of time and place.

"Why . . . er . . . yes," Ruben finally answered, after a cough. "I was already lost, as you well know. So I figured if I could find my way back to your place, then . . ."

"And to me?" Gabe blurted out, interrupting, too

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anxious for his answer to barter with time.

Ruben smiled a hurt smile.

"Sure . . . Gabriel . . . to you." He said this with a play of masquerade, like a grown person teasing a child, his low voice filled with compromise and false hope.

Gabe, hung up on its every sound, failed to catch or comprehend the essence behind the meaning, and a wild beating ensued in his heart. He looked up at Ruben and his steady gaze on him was a flaring torch, a burning light radiated with hope and love and young fulfillment.

"I'll get a fire going and heat our vittels and I'll bathe you and tend your leg and later you can smoke your pipe I thought to bring along, and you'll feel like new in no time," Gabe said excitedly, leaping up from the soft covey of leaves, all energy and work and servitude and spirited love.

With his hunting knife he cut cypress limbs, whittled them into spits, made a small fire and, after rummaging around the area for a quarter of an hour or more, he came up with an old Army kettle which he filled with water from a nearby slough and hung it over the fire. He then unrolled the sleeping bag, unzipped it, and stripped Ruben of his muddy clothes. When the water had come to a boil he bathed Ruben's naked body, using his handkerchief as a towel, and dressed his wounded leg. All this he did with the exactness and minuteness and love that the disciples may have done when they administered the spices to the body of Christ, making it a ritual, a thing wholly spirited and divine; for now, in his youth, in his eager, burning desires, Ruben was to him the Hephaestion of his heart.

When the crawfish bisque had been suficiently heated, Gabe divided it and, with hot coffee to wash it down, they ate in muted and seemingly satisfied silence, ate as they listened to the sounds of the forest at dusk, the melancholy rhythms of rain, the sound of chattering birds in the high loft, the snapping of rotten limbs, the ghostly fluttering of wings.

Ruben, still glutted with guilt over his wild, foolish flight, looked at Gabe at intervals which Gabe mistook for silent adoration, building his like for this stalward man who

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had become the most important person in his life.

When the meal was consumed, Gabe helped Ruben into the sleeping bag, filled his pipe and lit it for him, and fussed over him with little trivial comforts which he loved. There was nothing he wouldn't do for this man, and he showed this in a hundred ways as he tucked him in, questioned him about the pain in his leg, relit his pipe as it went out repeatedly, and tossed added kindling on the fire, for the nights were yet chilled.

For a long while he sat before the blaze, hugging his legs, while amber reflections danced over him and Ruben, and faintly lit the huge trunks of the trees in the immediate area, making the blackness of the night all the more intense, frightful. The quivering reflections reached the limbs of the trees, lay its fantastic gold over the long ghost streamers of moss, and ceiled the small clearing with faint light, and made them look as if they were sheltered beneath a snug roof of leaf and bark.

Their silence wore on as the creatures of the night, smug and secure in their miniature abodes, kept up their nocturnal revelry with nature: crickets chirping, frogs in a wild chorus, the continuous chime of locusts, making the whole forest ring, the occasional toot of an owl, the evasive rhythm of a falling leaf, a limb of a tree sodden with damp rot breaking and falling and crashing to the forest floor, the piercing cry of a fox, the scream of a bobcat.

All these multitudinous sounds were familiar to Gabriel's ears, for he had lived with them all his life, and he basked in their music—a music more intensifying and beautiful because he had Ruben beside him to share it. He loved the woods, the swamps; this primitive setting was his true home and, like the pressing foilage of the trees, the fence of enormous tree trunks, the vines and moss like hemming garlands, he longed to fold Ruben in protectiveness, as did the heavy limbs leaning lovingly in the night, the stout tree turnks like a fort, the caressing palms of moss, the kiss of the Gulf winds, the fire which licked over him like the sensuous tongue of a lover.

Here, he thought pensively, as he sat huddled around the

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small flame, he had Ruben as his very own . . . locked, barred from the outside world, his prisoner. And thinking these wonderful thoughts, he turned from his firelit gaze and studied Ruben's face in the golden firelight. He was resting on one elbow, his pipe thrust in one corner of his mouth, and his pale blue eyes . . . like chipped diamonds now . . . were locked on the flames, as if he was reading something of the future in the glowing coals. *Their* future perhaps—his and Ruben's.

"A penny for your thoughts?" he said lowly, not daring to stir their reverie, yet daring.

"Nan," was Ruben's reply, and he said the word as if he wished she was here instead of him, and a little twist of jealous pain found its way into Gabriel's heart.

"What about Nan?" Gabe asked, tossing a twig into the fire. A flame shot out, and with it a million sparks which climbed the darkness.

"Just wondering what she was doing about now. Worry about me is all she does. So," he sighed heavily, "I guess she is worrying . . . about me and Lottie."

Gabriel tried to think of something to say that would take Ruben's mind off his wife, this other woman, for he wanted no intrusion to come between them this night, robbing him of the warm presence of this person, breaking the magic spell of the night. But he could think of nothing plausible which he could mold into a word.

"I guess I've made things worse all the way around," Ruben went on, with a deeply serious tone in his voice, shifting his position in the sleeping bag. "Going off on this nutty wild goose chase, making my leg worse. Guess I should have stayed in your cabin until I got better. Now," and he dragged out the words, ". . . no telling when I'll get to see Nan and straighten this whole mess out."

Gabe gave him a look of deep concern, hating his unhappiness and gutted with the sickening feeling of being unable to do anything about it. And he wanted to do something about it, wanted to take that woebegone expression from his face, wanted to erase that sadness out of his pale blue eyes. If he only had the guts, he knew

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instinctively what he would do. He would rise and strip and climb into the sleeping bag with him and thrill him and make him ultimately happy. But fear and the possibility of Ruben's refusal tempered his maddening desires, capped his smoldering inner rages of young passion, so he did nothing. He just sat with his arms around his knees staring into the fire, while wild visions of Ruben's naked body danced in his wayward mind.

With a rising feeling of guilt he thought of the previous night, what he had tried to do to Ruben, and he knew now, was certain it was for this reason . . . and not Nan . . . that Ruben had attempted to escape from him, to leave his cabin before daylight, and their eyes locked with embarrassment.

He thought of this in their reign of mutual silence, turned it over and over in his tortured mind until he could endure the silence no longer, until he was desperate to know, had to know. And without turning, so that their eyes would not chance to meet, he asked lowly, almost in a cowed whisper, "Was it . . . was it because of what I did last night that made you leave . . . that caused you to run off before daybreak?"

Ruben did not immediately answer, and for a tense moment Gabe thought he had not heard him. The silence became more acute, the sound of leaves falling like rocks, and the breaking of rotten limbs were like the crackling of lightening in a storm.

"Wasn't that," Ruben finally answered, and he coughed harshly. "I just felt like I needed to be home . . . to explain to Nan. She has never tried to understand me, and no matter what I do she is always so suspicious." He stopped talking for a moment as he sucked on his pipe. "I . . . I just wanted to get back . . . where I belonged."

That word *BELONGED* stabbed Gabe in the heart, and a vacant place swallowed up his reasoning, like a fist in the pit of his stomach. Once he had fallen out of a tree, landing flat on his guts, and he had felt this same sickening nausea. The word seemed to separate them so profoundly, almost like the cut of a dull knife, and they felt far apart then, not

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close, warm, as of a moment ago.

"Then . . . then, you hate me for . . . trying what I did?" he braved to probe further, his wild desire for this lusty man driving him to untold disregard for danger.

Ruben let out a simple laugh, not as if ridiculing Gabriel, but a laugh which seemed to ridicule himself.

"Naw . . . how could I hate you for that?" he said. Gabe could hear him fumbling with the sleeping bag, and felt he was fumbling with his reason and logic. "I just didn't feel up to any kind of sex-play that night. My leg, understand, it was bothering me like hell."

At that, a lump rose in Gabe's throat. Suddenly his hopes soared. All this worry and sensations of guilt for nothing. Ruben hadn't minded. Of course it was his leg! He had been too sick, too feverish to consider doing anything with him. Any man would have felt the same, and he had not had the sense to see it. Galvanized now into bolder, more determined pursuits, he dared to turn his firelit gaze on that of Ruben, hoping frantically to read in those pale blue eyes what he had heard in words. But all he saw was those same piercing stars of blue light he had beheld on their first meeting—a little cold, a little frightful, meaningless since he was unable to read any meaning in their frigid depths. Yet, his bountiful nature, his strong and impelling desires, drove him on.

"What do you think of two men . . . two men doing things like that . . . to each other?"

Having said this, having pitted every fathom of his courage, fear pricked every pore of his skin, and he felt his hair stand out on ends.

"Why?" Ruben asked bluntly.

Gabriel gulped. Something choked up in his throat, and he swallowed hard before he spoke.

"I . . . I just wated to know . . . how you felt. It's important to me . . . honest . . . really important."

"Well, Gabe," Ruben replied, after a moment of consideration, "if that kind of thing is important, well . . ."

"I . . . I mean you're important," Gabe interrupted, as fear and guilt plagued him like the punishment of a crime.

"I'm deeply flattered," Ruben said, but whimsically, as if to pacify rather than to clearify the truth from fantasy. "I played around a little once, back during my high school days. Guess every boy did some time or other."

A spark of hope fanned up in Gabriel's heart.

"Used to go to a place in town called the Mirror Room," Ruben went on. "And there was a place out on Florida Avenue called the Black Lamp, guys who liked that catered to the place. I used to let them pick me up . . . for kicks mostly I guess . . . doing what the other's did. I let a few suck on it."

"Did you like it?" Gabe braved to question, the roof of his mouth as dry as powder. He began to tremble all over.

"You can't help but like it," Ruben went on unpretentiously. "Any boy would enjoy a hot mouth on his rod. And they're lying if they said they didn't. It feels good—sometimes better than a pussy, if a guy knows how to do it."

"Bet you won't let them do it any more," Gabe cried, placing in a bid for himself. "Not since you been married."

"Well, it's been a long time, not since high school. I guess I just grew away from that kind of doings, like all the rest. You just naturally do things when you're a kid that you don't keep doing after your grown. Guess every boy goes through that stage, playing around a little before he settles down with girls to raise a family. I call it sowing wild oats or something like that. Curiosity, I guess . . . wondering what it is like to have a man swinging on your rod. I never could understand why they liked to do it, but some of them sure went after it like they enjoyed it."

Silence fell between them. Even the night sounds, nature and that of small living creatures seemed to wait in muted expectation. The fire ebbed, the reflections flickered, dimmed as they played over Ruben's and Gabriel's bodies.

"I've never sucked," Gabe blurted out, the rasping sound of his voice like a confession in the darkness.

"Do you want to?" came Ruben's words like a plea.

"I've thought about it," Gabe said, as every nerve

tingled. "Wondered what it would be like, taking the strength of another man. Seems like both would enjoy it."

"Do you know what that makes you?" Ruben questioned seriously.

"Yes," Gabe stammered, training his gaze on the dying firelight. "But . . . but I don't like to think about it like that–being warped, or strange."

"It's not what you think, Gabe, but what others think about you–your friends."

"I don't have any friends . . . except you."

"Sure you do, nice boy like you. You just don't think you have any friends. Bet everyone likes you."

"You are my only friend, Ruben, the only friend I want."

"I appreciate that, Gabe, but you should have friends your age, not mine."

"I only want you."

Bravely, Gabriel turned his wayward gaze to meet Ruben's.

"Have you . . . ever tried something with other . . . boys?"

"No," Gabe said dreamily. "Honest. Only you. I have never wanted to do anything like that with anyone except you."

"Why me?"

The fire popped like a rifle shot. Sparks blew out, shimmered up into the deep blackness of the forest roof.

"Your looks," Gabe said as if out of a dream, the sound of his voice plaintive, like running water over stones, like a breeze through delicate blossoms. "Your body . . . what your body does to me when I look at it. Everything about you, Ruben."

"You know this is wrong?" Ruben said this kindly, not sharply or with reprimand, but as if he considered the consequences for Gabriel should he pursue such a course.

"Yes . . . I know that," Gabe replied, hanging his head. Then, automatically, he recoiled. "No . . . I don't know that, Ruben. Maybe it isn't wrong. Maybe we've just been taught to think it's wrong."

"Wrong or not," Ruben advised, "we have to consider wrong, for society considers it wrong. We have to go alo with the majority."

"You and I?" Gabriel said, his voice like a belligere cry. "Way out here, away from everythin can't . . . couldn't you and I pretend it's right. No one el would know . . . or care."

"No one but us," Ruben lamented, speaking from t core of his convictions. "We would know, Gabe, and that most important. It is what we would think, what we wou feel about ourselves, about each other, if we resorted such a thing."

"But . . . as long as we both enjoyed it?"

Ruben sat up in the sleeping bag, took a twig from t fire and relit his pipe. He then sat quietly for a momen inhaling and exhaling, the blue smoke curling around ar about him and Gabriel.

"Is merely enjoying it the most essential thing?" Rube asked, breaking the maw of silence. "What about ourselv as true men? Wouldn't we naturally grow less respectful each other? Like each other less?"

"I don't see what that has to do with out liking or hatin or respecting each other," Gabe said defensively. "It woul cause us to like each other more . . . honest!"

Ruben gazed into the fire, his face a troubled mask.

"What you're trying to say is that you want us to hav sex, isn't it?" He paused, let out a sigh. "You know I' married, Gabe."

Gabe frowned. He secretly hated Ruben for that. "Wha should that matter? Our life out here would be ours, apa from St. Martinville, New Iberia, your scouting. When yo get well you could spend the weekends with me in m cabin."

Ruben laughed softly, sucked on his pipe. His eye glowed with luster, as if he enjoyed being sought.

"You've got it all planned, haven't you, Gabe? You ca vision us months ahead doing this, can't you? You'll hav us living together next."

Gabriel gathered courage as events flooded his way.

"Would that be so bad . . . so awful, Ruben?"

"It's not a matter of bad or awful, Gabe. I'll be out of here in a day or two, back on my post, with Nan . . . I hope . . . and likely as not you and I will never see one another again."

An emptiness welled up in Gabe's trembling heart. Ruben's voice, his attitude, what he said tore at his nerves and made him feel sick in the pit of his stomach, and he thought, *How can I go on without him? Never seeing him again.* And at the awesome forlorn thought, of the probability, he looked at Ruben as if he was seeing him for the last time—a long luxurious look which caused tears to spring into his eyes. And seeing him there half-submerged in the silken sleeping bag, his chest naked to the waist, the lusty contours bathed in the golden light, his dark hair and mustache, his red lips, his pale roving eyes, he thought him more handsome, more alluring than he had ever seen him. And he wanted to leap up from the fire, run to him, and cling to him there in the balmy darkness, to take him, to love him as his heart had willed it. But he just sat there staring at him as if he was seeing something impossible and unattainable.

"You know we won't be seeing each other again, don't you?" Ruben repeated, as if to brand it permanently on his mind.

"Then . . . then I have lost you," Gabriel stammered, as if he had lost the palatial grandeur of heaven and now faced an eternal hell.

Ruben tried to laugh, but Gabriel's firm, steadfast gaze on his fell his lips to silence. Then he said, with frankness, "You can't like me that much, Gabe, for you don't really know me. Only two days. Aren't you dreaming a lot, imagining what I may be, when I may not be that at all? Be sensible."

"Be sensible!" Gabe came back in childish protest, flinging out his arms. "Ruben, I am being sensible! I know what you are like. I can sense it. I do want you . . . forever."

Ruben laughed outright. "Forever!" He laughed again.

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"Forever is a mighty long time, Gabriel boy. You don't know what you're talking about. Even men and women don't live together or want each other forever . . . much less two men."

"Alexander and Hephaestion," Gabriel lamented bravely, and with a semblance of pride.

"Who are they?"

Gabriel told him about each of them, the book he had read many times, their struggles, their beautiful relationship, their tragic death. He told it as if he had known them personally, and that their human presence had greatly affected his own life.

"They were the greatest," he concluded, giving Ruben a wide-awake stare. "Romeo and Juliet were as nothing, with their childish love, compared to them."

Ruben grunted, and knocked the tobacco out of his pipe.

"You say Alexander refused to bury this other guy?"

"Yes," Gabriel said triumphantly, "for days afterward."

"And you want us to live like that?"

"To me, you are Hephaestion," Gabriel said, and his tone of voice was luxuriant with deep and sensual passion. His eyes burned hard and determinedly on Ruben, like a greedy, hungry animal stalking a prey. "The first moment I saw you coming up on your beautiful black stallion I knew. That very moment I knew."

"And you're Alexander," Ruben said jokingly, trying not to laugh. "Well, Gabe boy, you got it all figured out. You gonna kill me way out here, then refuse to bury me, just so you can keep me?"

Gabriel's hopes suddenly wilted, for he knew Ruben was playing a prank on him, making light of something ultimately dear and precious to him in his young, callow life.

"You're joking with me," he said then, lowering his gaze.

Ruben gave him a pensive look, and a wrinkle formed on his brow.

"No, Gabe, not really. I just wanted you to see and

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realize the absurdity of it . . . this Alexander and this Hephaestion . . . us together like that. Don't you understand that perhaps the worst part, the awful part of that story has been purposely left out?"

"What part?" Gabriel was quick to question.

"The real part." He stopped talking, as if to consider what he must say, fantasy or reality. He breathed heavily, not wanting to wound Gabriel in any way—his youth, his obvious innocence. "In times of war, Gabe, men are subject to do strange and unpredictable things. No doubt this Alexander was on the battlefield at the time, far from civilization, women, so he took this queer, this faggot as a substitute, as I would let you take me, if I let you have me at all. It's not the wonderful thing you think it was, these two men. You see only the storybook side of it—not the dirt beneath."

"It is beautiful to me," Gabriel declared with an innocent gaze.

"Then you keep it beautiful," was Ruben's advice. "Keep it in books like this *Star Of Macedon*, this *Alexander the Great*, and leave it at that. Don't ever go off half-cocked trying it for yourself."

The futility of his words, the final sound of his voice dimly awakened a partial of truth in Gabriel's unfailing heart, but not enough that he still did not want Ruben for his very own, and, rising from the dying fire, he went to the sleeping bag and knelt down beside him.

"Ruben," he said, his heart in his voice. "When giving is free, why can't you give? What will you lose?"

"Gabriel, more than you may realize," Ruben whispered faintly, his voice but an echo. He sucked on his empty pipe. "Maybe our friendship, and it would hurt me to lose that."

"It will only enrich it," Gabe persisted, moving a little nearer to Ruben, sensing his warmth, his splendid masculinity.

"Or destroy it," Ruben came back wrathfully.

Suddenly, at the futility of it all, the seeming thwarted defeat, Gabriel could no longer hold his temper, so maddening his desires, so vexing his nerves on his control.

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"But look what I've done for you! Saved your life! You'd be dead now if it wasn't for me—sucking out that snake poision, risking my own life to save yours. If you had any gratitude, you'd let me have you, once . . . just once!"

"You don't mean that," Ruben said with firmness, laying a warm, steady hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "You wouldn't want me, if you had to take me for that reason."

"I would! I would!" Gabe cried, drawing his lustful body in close to that of Ruben's, bold now beyond all reason and conviction. Ruben's open discussion concerning sex had inflamed his own imagination, awakening at last this inner, secretive craving he dared not discuss or reveal to other men. And relying upon his own psychotic madness of desire, he tossed his reserves aside, his young, sexual drive disreputable and absurd. "I want you, Ruben, like I have never wanted anyone in my life, and you owe me that . . . you know you do."

A bobcat screamed in the swamp, like an ill omen to Gabriel's ludicrous nadir, and an owl screeched, eerily, lonely, like the lostness in Gabriel's desolate heart.

"You can't want me . . . that much," Ruben declared, moving over near the edge of the sleeping bag.

"I do! I do!" Gabe sighed, panting, daring to slide his body even closer to Ruben's.

"Let's go to sleep," said Ruben after an instant of stark silence, and he pulled Gabe in beside him, drew him to his chest. "Tomorrow you will have forgotten all about it, and will be wanting someone else."

Gabriel buried his face in the hollow of Ruben's chest. "That will never happen . . . ever!" He began to rub his hand over the mat of curly black hair, around Ruben's nipples, down his abdomen, as if demanding it, as if, through his own frantic will, he magically conjured Ruben to comply to his wishes. His nervous, probing fingers found Ruben's spongy organ in its nest of black wool, clutched it wantonly, milking it until it swelled under his rapacious touch.

Ruben took his hand and slipped it aside, but no sooner had he done so then Gabe slipped it back and clutched the

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enormous rod again, this time ravenously avariciously clinging to it as if it were a lifeline, seeing it in the darkness by the mere touch of his hard fingers searching out its Gargantuan contours, the veins, the mushroomed head, the slit, the vibrating muscle.

"Cut it out, Gabe!" Ruben growled, shoving his hand away again.

"Please, Ruben, please!" Gabriel half-sobbed, his hot lips sliding down his chest, down to his naval, frantically, demandingly, as Ruben tried to detour him to his former position. "I've gotta have it! Gotta! Please!"

"You don't have to . . . and you know it," Ruben said gruffly, straining his lungs as he defended his body. "Don't make me mad, Gabe, please don't make me mad!"

"Ruben . . . PLEASE!" Gabriel whimpered, grabbing him about the waist and clinging to him in ravenous lust, gone too far now in his perverted desires, his secret revealed, to stop now. As if he already knew, instinctively, as if he was well-experienced in the provocative art, he lowered his head, slipped his lips over the upright organ, gloried, embellished through every vein and sinew by the throbbing warmth of it. As his lips went further down, down to the curling dispersion of hair, sucking madly, hungrily, Ruben's uplifted thighs parted invitingly, as if for a moment of wild devilry he had surrendered, enjoying the constant and prolonged thrill.

Then, crying, "Shit!" in retaliation, he grabbed Gabriel by the shoulders, pulled his body up parallel to his, and held him fast in his arms. "We can't do this! We just can't!" he cried, not letting Gabriel go. "I won't let you! I just won't."

Breathing hard, his face pressed savagely to Ruben's hairy chest, Gabe could say nothing. Though he tried, he could not wiggle free of Ruben's grasp, so he remained content just to be near him, his warmth, his powerful strength. Yet, as if strange and undying flames and fantastic fires danced within him, he knew he must have him. He had had a taste of man, a taste of Ruben, and that taste was unleashing a sexual fury within him, one he could not

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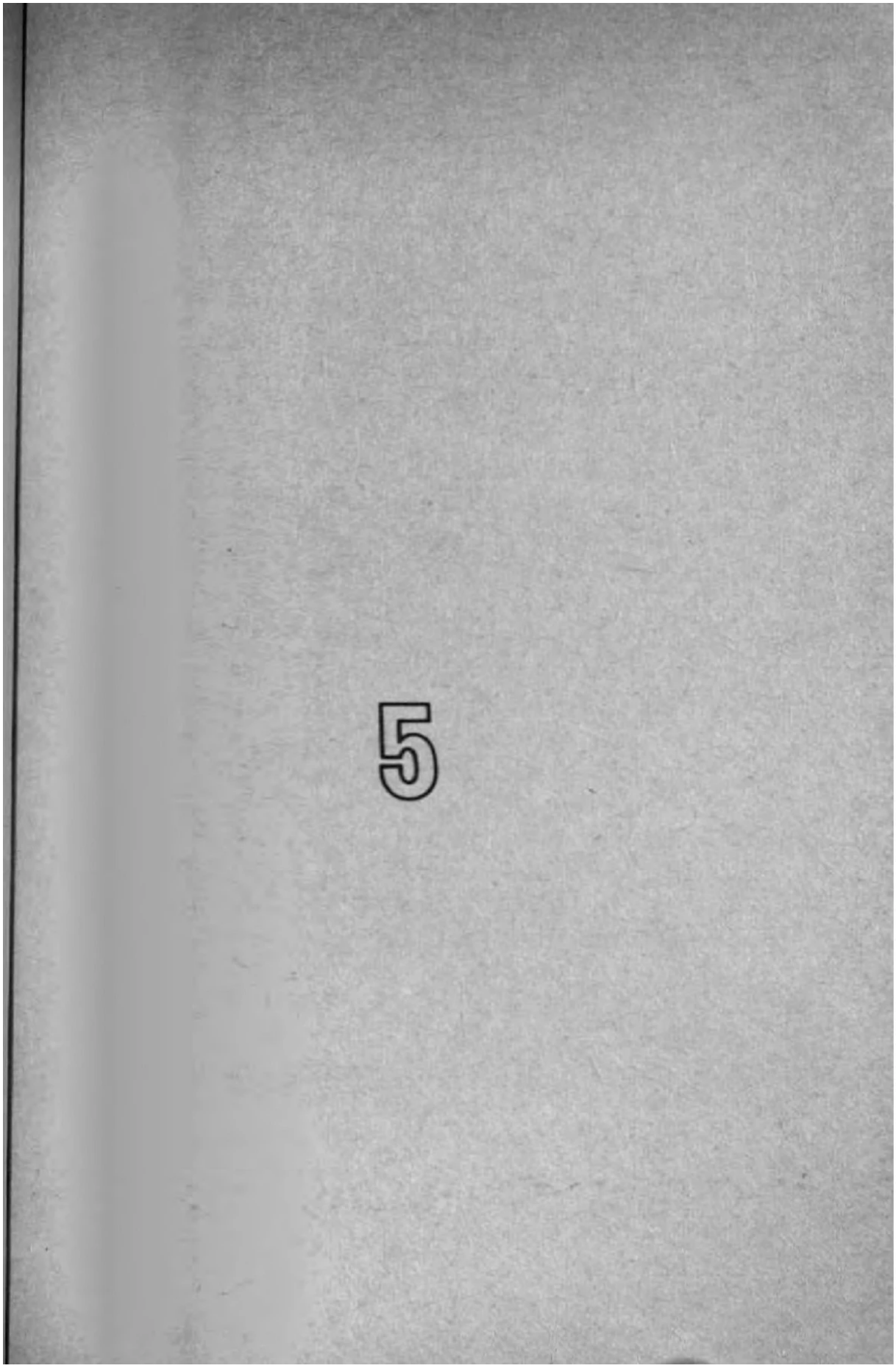
quench, one never stilled, unless Ruben's body stilled it.

Gabriel knew this, profoundly, as he lay in the arms of the man he must have, would have. And he knew desperately that he would find a way to get him, lawful or not. He would find a way to have him for his own.

So he lay smothered by the warmth and fierce beauty of his man, thinking, planning, scheming, glorified in his maleness, the distinctive quality of him, his grave power, his giant frame—lay and listened to the sounds of the night, the continuous language of the forest after darkness, listened quietly, thankful of Ruben's steady breathing, his smell, his glowing warmth, listened rapt, as if he heard the breathing of sleeping animals, the scurrying of a field mouse, the whispering whirl of a snake through damp leaves, the crackling of the flames, the old wind in tendrils of moss, the drops of water from the high loft of limbs and blossom, listened . . . wide awake . . . and alerted to everything around him, more aware of things, of nature, than at any other time in his young life, his every emotion magnified and intensified by Ruben's body next to his, his huge arms folded around him, the desires that ran hot, like electrical wires, flashing through his own body, and with that fire the will to scheme and plan and maneuver his and Ruben's life in a path that would bring them together.

"Take me . . . I am yours," a voice seemed to say to him, as he lay in Ruben's warm arms—a voice like Ruben's voice, filled with haunts and old music and silken refrains. And the Gulf winds, infiltrating the heavily limbed trees, the streamers of moss, seemed to answer that wayward call, as his heart answered it.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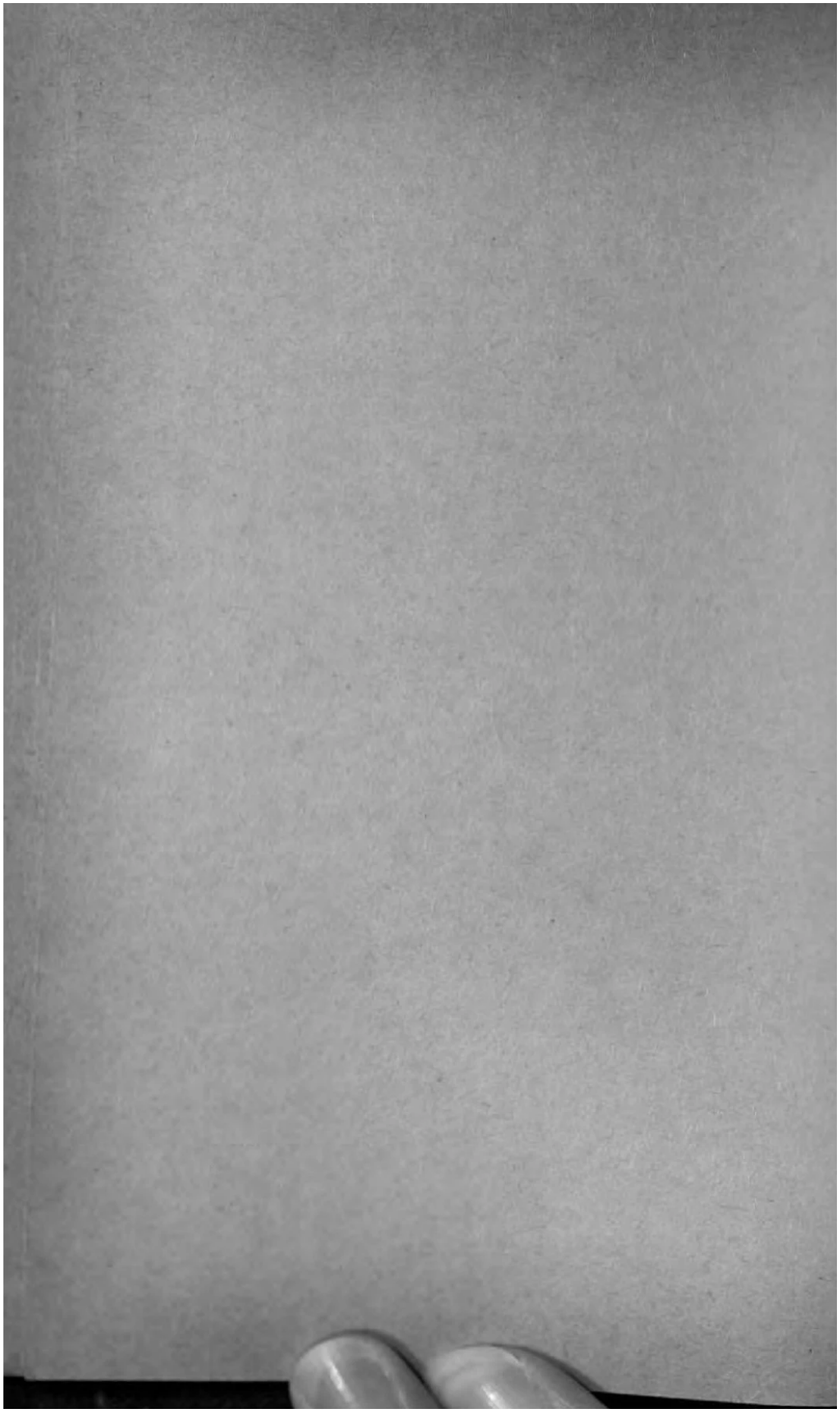

The calmness of dawn, silently, like a shadow going through a shadow, moved through the Longfellow Evangeline Memorial State Park, weaving through the moss laden trees, laying its somber gold on the snow-white trumpet vine, the pale blue swamp hyacinths, the wild, yellow bergamot, the golden honey locust and the delicate lavender tulip trees.

Shadows from the huge columned trees, like steeple spires, lay softly over the damp leaf floor of the forest, and fell faintly on the shiny sleeping bag where Gabriel, just awakening, peered out from Ruben's huge hairy arms and glanced about.

Everything was so still, so serene, so clean. Everything smelled of leaf mold, of moss, of the sweet aroma of woods flowers and of last night's rain, and with it the odor of Ruben, his maleness, and his richly scented tobacco pipe.

Hating to arise, to part his own warm body from that of Ruben, but knowing he had to, to start things going for the day, Gabriel finally dragged himself out of the sleeping bag, careful not to stir Ruben, and made coffee. While he hovered over the small blaze, he watched Ruben's placid face out of the corner of his eyes, noted its calm beauty with his eyes closed, how he resembled a young boy sleeping, his arresting expression so bland, so utterly undisturbed by life, pain, sorrow. He noticed too how his neatly trimmed mustache curled above his red lips, and the soft, blossom-like glow of his complexion. Already he loved him, as Hephaestion surely must have loved Alexander, and for this reason he concluded that he could never let him go.

But how could he keep him?

He had pondered this situation during the long, effortless hours of the night, scheming, planning, dreaming how life would be for him if he could keep Ruben for himself. So far, he had found no answer. So far, his thoughts had ventured only to a vision of himself lying in Ruben's strong arms, in the glorious hollow of his uplifted thighs, and there his thoughts had left him. This vision

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could be but the end of his dreaming, the end of his well-sought goal, and not the beginning . . . not the beginning of this morning, his final hour to conjure up some plausible excuse to keep him.

By the time the coffee was ready, Ruben awakened and Gabriel helped him into his clothes.

"You're an early bird," Ruben remarked, as he wrenched at the stiffness in his leg. "Eager to get going . . . eh?"

"The early bird always catches the worm," said Gabriel, as he handed Ruben a cup of steaming coffee.

"Merci," Ruben cried, laughing, and Gabriel laughed with him. "See, I'm becoming an Acadian, too. Looks like some of you is rubbing off on me, huh, Gabe?"

"Hope so," Gabriel replied, and he meant this literally.

Ruben eyed him with infinite concern, squinting his pale blue eyes at the steam pouring up from his coffee cup.

"I'm anxious to get started, if I can get this leg to gyrating."

Returning from the fire, Gabriel eyed for a tense moment Ruben's eager expression, much to his dislike, for he wished erratically that they could remain here in this beautiful forest forever, that time would stand still, and they would be forever young, ageless, caring for one another.

Gabriel blurted out, "Where are you aiming to go . . . back to my cabin?"

Ruben hung his head, looked at his sore leg.

"I thought I'd try and persuade you to show me the way to St. Martinville or New Iberia."

"Why, that's miles and miles from here!" Gabriel snorted, waving an arm. "You'd never make it on that leg."

Ruben looked at him with an exaggerated stare, one of complete bafflement.

"But this leg does need medical attention . . . not that you haven't done a wonderful job, Gabe, and I do need to see Nan."

"I can take you back to the cabin," Gabriel declared, schemingly.

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Ruben eyed him suspiciously. "That wouldn't help. I still need to see a doctor."

"But I can doctor you, Ruben," Gabe suggested, magnifying his desires to do this by the bright hot light in his eyes. "All you need is plenty of rest, and when your well enough, I'll take you to New Iberia and to your wife."

Ruben, still seated, his coffee cup dangling in one limp hand, refused to look at Gabriel squarely. Instead, he pretended to busy himself watching a drenched anhinga drying at the foot of a cypress root.

"I don't know," he said at last, his gaze still locked on the wet bird. "That seems like the long way round to me, Gabe—not doubting your medical skill." He glanced wildly about. "Aren't there any trails in here leading to the main road, or to some small town. Maybe to a farmhouse where I can put in a call?"

"The nearest town is Butte La Rose," Gabe explained. "And we'd have to cross Catahoula Lake."

"What about a boat?"

"They'd all be docked on the other side of the lake, near Butte La Rose."

Ruben sighed in acute disappointment.

"What about a road then, or a trail?"

"There's not any," Gabe was ready with a reply.

"Hell! It looks bad then," Ruben retorted.

"We ought to return to my cabin," Gabriel said hopefully. He looked down at Ruben, drank in his sad expression, his tired, pain-wracked eyes, and he could not, would not let him go. "Believe me, Ruben, it will be best, and I know a shortcut."

Ruben tried to stand up, but fell back in a shower of pain. He tried again, as Gabriel rushed to help him, and for a brief moment he stared about him, peering through the lacework of trees, hoping to see something of civilization, anything to give him hope.

"Dammit! Ain't there anything out there but swamp? Gabe, please, be a good boy and go to that clearing over yonder, tell me what you see."

Gabriel leaned Ruben against the trunk of a tree and

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went to the clearing. In the hazy, golden distance, a distance eaten up with early morning fog, he spotted several buildings thrust up above the emerald-green vegetation, recognized them to be a portion of St. Martinville. *St. Martinville!* he whispered to himself, so near. They were so near to home, a doctor, Ruben's wife. A dart of guilt ran wild up his spine and exploded in his young, scheming brain. He should tell Ruben, he knew, do the right thing, what any red-blooded American considered his humane duty to do. But he could not! Lose Ruben? He would not! He didn't have the heart, the strength.

He wouldn't let Ruben die of snake poison, he was certain of that, but he couldn't let him go, lose him to his wife, to civilization, his job, the world!

For a petrified moment he remained in the clearing, battling his convictions, his rightful duty against his enormous capacity for Ruben, his impulses which were stronger than his logic, his manly breeding, his elemental teachings.

Since he was out of his teens he had longed for someone like Ruben Russo, someone so utterly masculine he resembled someone out of the Bible, an enormous figure in a diminutive world. Now, at long last, having found his lordly prize, he was destined to hang onto him, despite convictions, church, religion, his former training. Silently, all these noble qualities slipped through his mind like sand through his fingers, as he saw Ruben's handsome face as he had seen it the previous night by firelight. Man's laws, he quickly concluded, were but tasteless salt compared to his strong and unyielding feelings for Ruben Russo.

He turned from the clearing and entered the woods.

"Not a house in sight," he announced, not looking directly into Ruben's woebegone eyes.

Ruben, still leaning up against the cypress trunk, suddenly pale from strain and pain, screwed up his face and eyed Gabriel with almost rebellious contempt.

"We'll go back to your cabin then," he sighed, as if that one decision gave him enormous pain.

Quickly, radiant with glee, Gabriel cut him a crutch

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from a nearby sycamore limb and bundled up their gear. When he had strapped it to his naked shoulders, and with Nero safely perched, he helped Ruben fit the crutch under his armpit where he had cut a fork, and they ambled off through the shadows.

In somewhat the truth, Gabriel did know a shortcut. If they followed the contributories running south from Catahoula Lake, they would come out north of Dauterive Lake and to the cabin. This course Gabe took in eager stride, careful to slow his pace when Ruben showed signs of fatigue, and to sit and rest when they came across clumps of shade. Mostly, it was going through swamp bottoms all the way, wading knee-deep in slimy water, or through lush regions of wild rice and bergamot.

Though dramatically easy for Gabriel, it was slow and painstaking to Ruben, but Gabe showed him every consideration. Ruben was his newlyfound prize, the glorious spoils of his youthful conquest for passion, and he intended him no ill treatment, nor did he harbor any illusions that any harm would come to him while under his protective guidance. In all due respect he regarded and treated Ruben like a prince, a personage of nobility and royalty, and saw to his every comfort.

At noon they sat beneath the shade of a blooming magnolia which overlooked a marsh lagoon, and ate the remains of the warmed crawfish bisque. They talked little. The sun was hot, sweat poured from their bodies in irritating floods, nats and mosquitoes harassed them constantly, sharp vines and Spanish dagger sawed and ripped at their flesh, and both were overly eager to reach the cabin and the primitive comforts it afforded. Too, they saved their breath when they did not talk, the breath they would both need for the final lap, and their conversations diminished to a smile now and then, a lifted eyebrow, a strained look.

Only once did Ruben falter, and that was when they had to cross a stream heavily infested with Spanish dagger and Swiss pines, so redundant was his great strength, his determination, and he had been trapped in an obstacle of

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sharp sword-like frawns.

"Go ahead, Gabe boy," he had cried, waving to Gabriel from the opposite bank. "I'll catch up, Give me a little time."

Without saying a word, Gabriel retraced his steps through the green slime, untangled him from the sharp daggers, and helped him to the embankment. All with patient and loving care, the mere touch of him sending through his young body trails of wild ecstasy. He had no intentions of leaving him alone, to wander in the swamps without his aid, and he said as much when they had gained solid ground and were back on the homeward trail Gabriel knew so well.

"You make me look like an old maid schoolteacher," Ruben said in exhaustion. "I'm completely and utterly disgraced, and me a scout in the bargain."

You look beautiful to me, Gabriel wanted to say, as he turned back and saw him standing in a little patch of goat dandelion in the bright sunlight, his uniform drenched and clinging to his white skin, every muscle delineated, every rise and swell and beautiful plane of his body like that of a carved God.

His prisoner! His eloquent Hephaestion!

So, through the rises and shallows they continued, this pagan of perversion leading his older, normal bisexual spoil, through lush grasses that looked like tinted glass, amid flowering prairie lilies flowing above their knees, through fields of wild rice where herons perched like somber sentinels, under the canopies of curlews in wild flight, into the kingdoms of sandpiper and the gaudy gadwall duck, onward, bent to the Gulf winds, toward the little cabin on Dauterive Lake, their love cabin . . . a prison!

In the showy grandeur of dusk light, at the gait of funeral import, they came to the cabin, drained of energy, sodden with fatigue. Came through the channels invaded by the Sandhill crane nibbling on choice crawfish, the army of leopard frogs already chanting, fields of meadow larks screaming at their dreary approach, passing a feathery angel in the crimson sky . . . a scissor-tailed flycather . . . who

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rose like a rainbow dream before them, and among the haunted dells where the invisible whippoorwill so eagerly and so early cried his melancholy love call to his mate, all so appropriate for Gabriel Carondelet, the swamp angel, bringing on the lead the epitome of his wayward passions.

Under twilight skies Gabe bathed himself in Dauterive Lake, then bathed Ruben and dressed his swollen leg. And for a while they sat out on the pier naked and rested, drying their bodies in the steady breeze from off the Gulf Coast, their feet dangling in the water, the weariness of the day lifting from their sodden frames, the worry of tomorrow momentarily forgotten.

When it was completely dark, the stars coming out bright and clear in their black velvet kingdoms, and the lightening bugs flittering here and there, like living toys of the stars, the two men retired to the cabin. Gabriel lit the oil lamp, stirred up a fire in the wide hearth, and poured a jug of gumbo in the dangling pot. In the hot ashes he baked a couple of huge yams from last year's crop, and cut two enormous slices of French bread to go along with their gumbo and hot coffee.

When the meal was ready they both ate with relish, like starved woodsmen of the West, and as with a habit of theirs, silently, the way of animals. Now and then Gabe tossed Nero a crumb or two and chidded him playfully. Afterward he fed his coon and the pigeons in the dovecote, leaving the wild hog to root for himself. Then he swam to the other side of the lake, brought back the little dugout where Ruben had left it, and tied it up near the wharf. With this maneuver he had cut off any approaches to his cabin, and felt relief for the first time that it was completely surrounded by water. With the sharp, quick cunning of youth, he stood for a moment on the sandy atoll and gazed up at the cabin, gazed almost greedily, thinking of Ruben up there trapped in the shroud of golden light, and what he would become for him in the future . . . if everything went according to his plans.

Then he made his proud, victorious way up the rickety steps, pecked Nero on the bill as he entered the door, and

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closed it after him. Closed it, like a man shutting a door on him and a desirable woman.

He found Ruben seated in the straight-backed chair in front of the hearth, nibbling on a piece of steaming yam, his eyes glued to the blaze, his expression bland, fathomless to read.

When he came in, the floor squeaked and Ruben looked up from his dreamy meditations and asked gravely: "Gabe, how much longer do you think I'll be here like this?" He pointed to his leg which, despite the bandage, looked clean and healthy.

"Why do you ask?" was Gabe's question, and he voiced it a little sharply—so sharp Ruben jumped.

"Oh, just wondering," Ruben replied, glancing back into the fire. "Guess I'm concerned too much about Nan, when I should't be, and my job. A man can't help think about his job."

"I can go back into St. Martinville tomorrow," Gabe suggested—anything to keep him here, content. "I can make another call to your wife, and to your job, for we are going to have to have more supplies anyway."

Ruben gave him a thoughtful look, then dropped his eyes.

"I hate for you to go to all that much trouble . . . after me cutting such a monkeyshine as I did yesterday, causing you all that extra bother." He half-smiled. "But I would be very grateful if you would."

"I'd be glad to, Ruben, you know that," Gabe said with anticipation in his wild voice. He gave him a long, steady look, devouring his grave beauty with his eyes, noticing with sensuous pleasure how the light of the hearth reflected over his nakedness, how its amber haze brought out the thickness to his body hair, the desirable mystery in the deep hollow of his loins. And he added lovingly, after drinking in the glory of his giant physique, "You know I'd do anything for you, Ruben, anything!"

Ruben refused to glance his way.

"I know that," he murmured defensively, as if he knew but loathed what he knew. "Maybe . . . maybe you like me

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too much."

Gabriel was hasty to ask, "Why do you say that?"

Ruben then looked up at him, but glanced quickly, his eyes darting over Gabriel's nakedness.

"Doing all this for me, when maybe I don't deserve it, especially when I have nothing to offer in return."

Offer in return! Gabriel thought he did.

"What do you expect me to do, turn you out in the night, let you die of snakebite? I am human, too, Ruben, and can feel for others . . . as I would like for them to feel for me."

He shot Ruben an illusive glance, but one burning with his newly promised love for him—a love he yearned with a rage to fulfill.

"You do too much," Ruben said. "I'm as helpless as a turtle on its back."

"You won't always be," Gabriel cried, though he wished he would be as far as his own interests were concerned. "You'll be on that leg walking again in no time. As soon as I get the chance I'll shine up your saddle and gear and maybe I can arrange to borrow or rent a horse for you somewhere in St. Martinville. In a week or two, if things go well, you'll be as good as new."

"I didn't think it was going to take that long," Ruben said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I could be out of here tomorrow if I had a horse. Maybe one of the scouts could bring an extra horse for me out of New Iberia . . . that is, if you would call and make arrangements. Then in a couple of days I'll be out of your hair . . . for good."

I don't want you out of my hair! Gabriel wanted to shout at him, but he said instead, "Riding a horse so soon on that leg? Get it all inflamed again? I won't hear of it!"

"Now, Gabe!"

"Honest! You do want to get well don't you?" And he added cunningly, "You do want your wife to see you in good shape, don't you?"

Ruben nodded.

"Well, it's going to take time. And you've got plenty of that right now . . . time to sit and think and talk and fish

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and get a tan in the sun while your healing."

Ruben smiled a wry smile, and nudged Gabriel on the thigh.

"You're really serious about all this, aren't you? Taking care of me like I was kin or something, maybe even a brother."

"Well, I do hate seeing you like this," Gabe said, his gaze obviously betraying his true emotions. "A man as healthy as you. Know how I'd feel all cooped up, not able to get out, be free." Then he added more seriously, "It won't be all that bad here, Ruben, honest. This sunshine is going to do you good, and all this relaxation, fishing, hunting, trapping, swimming."

"The little planner," Ruben laughed, then screwed up his face as a pain ran up his leg. "Got it all mapped out, a neat little schedule for me, haven't you? What's on the tableau for tomorrow—a stroll through the woods, bird watching, flower judging, a swimming lesson?"

"You're making fun!"

"No, Gabe," Ruben said, shaking his head. "Just having fun. Having a kick with you."

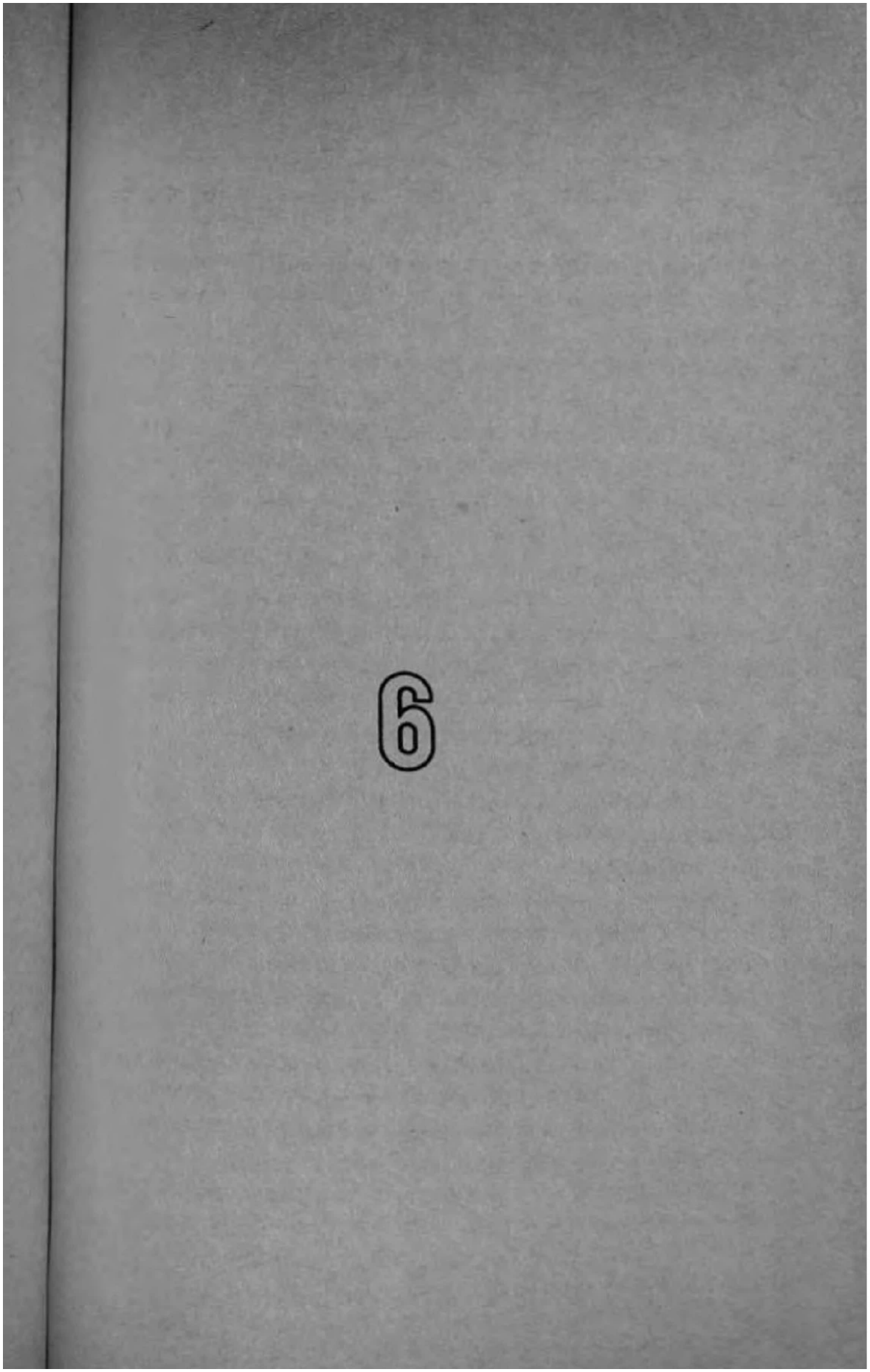
Gabriel beamed.

"Then, you're not going to balk? You'll stay . . . willingly, until you get completely well, well enough for me to say it's right for you to go?"

"My scouts honor," Ruben said, still laughing, holding his right hand over his heart. "I'm completely under your jurisdiction. My body is at your disposal." He fumbled in his chair, helped himself up, the quivering of his limbs showing his strain, his obvious fatigue. "Now let's hit the hay. I'm dead."

When they were in the bunk, their naked bodies sprawled on the soft pelts, and the oil lamp was out, with only the flickering reflections of the hearthfire to light the tiny room, Ruben turned and said to Gabriel:

"Now, no wrestling tonight. Tired as I am, I might have to give in to you."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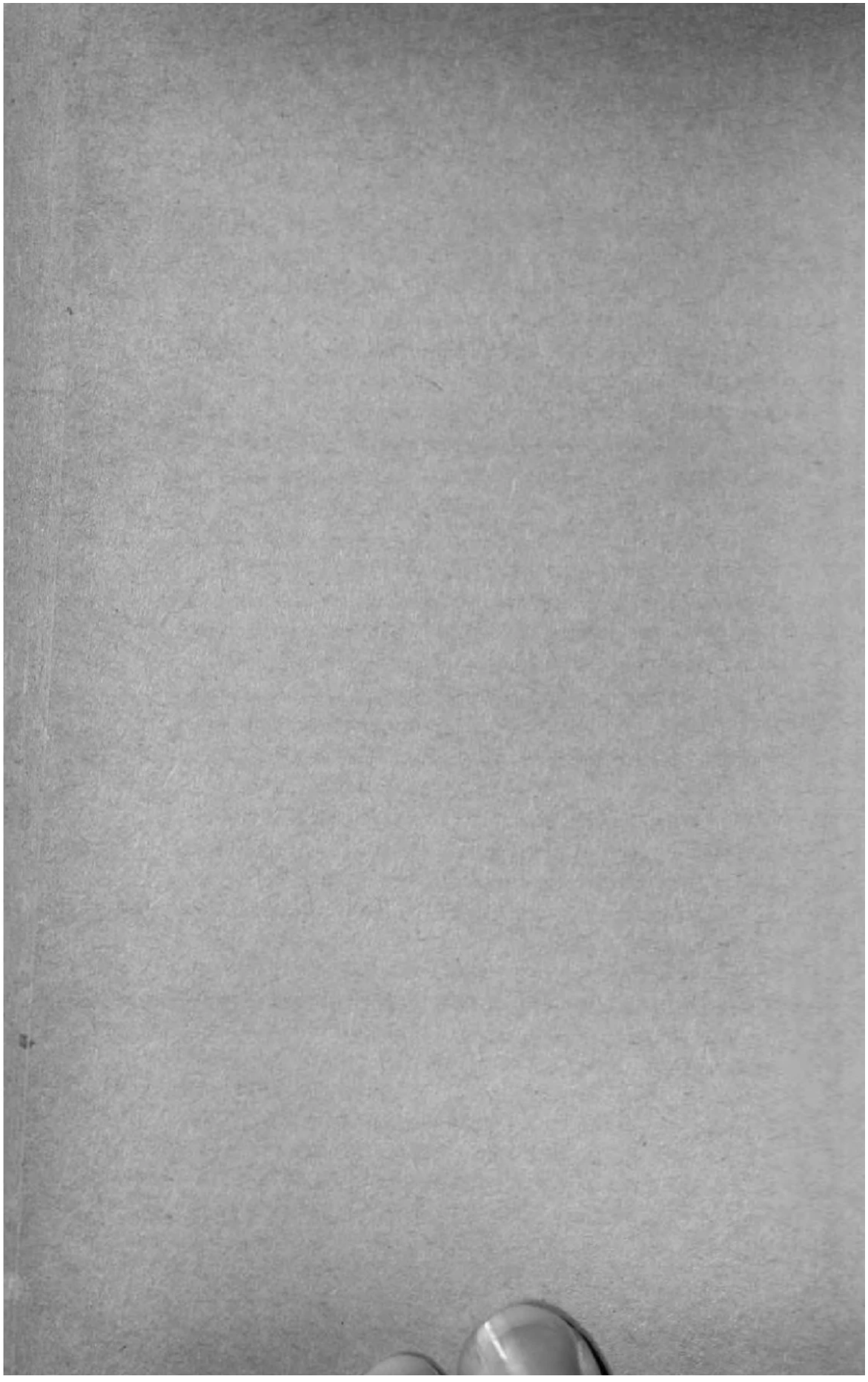

The following morning Gabriel rose early and relieved the dead stallion of its saddle and bridle, then furbished the black leather and silver trim until it shone like new. Each stroke was a labor of love, and the harness and trappings holy relics, for they belonged to Ruben—which enhanced their value in Gabriel's eyes.

He had not attempted touching Ruben the previous night, though he had lain on the fur pelts beside him tossing and turning, sleep impossible, so hot was the passion burning inside him. But in the back of his mind was the idea that he would try again and again until Ruben complied. That Ruben would eventually give over to him he never doubted. Unless his desire to have him was so strong and imposing that it defied his logic. Whatever the reason, he knew he must have him, that he had to find means to keep him here in his little cabin for as long as possible.

As he furbished the saddle, he could see Ruben propped up in bed through the little window of the cabin, and at intervals he glanced in that direction, devouring his grave beauty with hot tormented eyes. And each time he looked at him, strong, unyielding impulses told him that he had to keep him here as close to him as possible, had to think of something that would seem plausible and understandable.

Sound reasoning told him profoundly that he could not keep Ruben here against his will, unless he tied him up of course, and that before long his people and his place of employment would be inquiring and coming in search for him. When he thought of these terrible things, thought of Ruben being taken from him, hopelessness fell away in his heart, and he would eye Ruben stirring about in the cabin, limping on one leg, with an even greater intensity of longing. He would get the sudden urge to rush into the cabin where he was and, stripping off his white briefs, lay him on the great fur bed and take his fill of him. But this seemed ridiculous, especially when Ruben had spurned him, and to try a second time required more courage than he presently possessed.

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When he finished the saddle and trappings he placed them in one corner of the cabin, all under Ruben's watchful eyes, and went out and covered the dead stallion with sand so that he would not smell up the area or draw a horde of green flies. Then he packed his haversack, took Nero off his peg, and prepared to go into St. Martinville for supplies.

Ruben, standing in the doorway and clad only in his white shorts, reminded him impatiently of the phone calls he was to make.

"I won't forget," Gabriel assured him, turning at the wharf to face him, eyeing his dark handsomeness and feeling a little sad that he would have to leave him even for so brief a while.

By noon he made it to St. Martinville. In the little grocery store where he bought some canned goods, bread, yams, apples, coffee, sugar, and candies, he passed the pay phone a number of times during his rounds along the food racks, but could not bring himself to call Ruben's wife or his place of employment. All morning, during his trip through the swamps, he had tossed these thoughts over and over in his mind, and the closer he got to St. Martinville, the more his mind was made up that he would not make the calls at all.

Instinctively, he knew this was wrong. He had not been reared to do such an unheard of thing. But his passionate impulses told him briefly but strongly that if he called, within a day or two at the most the Preserve unit would have a horse out to his cabin on which Ruben could return to civilization. And he would be out of his life forever.

When his groceries had been checked and he had paid for them he held back a nickel, went to the phone, put it in the slot and dialed the number Ruben had given him. At least he could call Ruben's wife, he concluded, growing more nervous each minute. But when a woman's voice on the other end of the line said *hello,* he quickly hung up. Nervously he hung around the store, thumbed through several magazines at the book rack, trying to decide what to do—to give himself more time to weigh the consequences.

The consequences didn't look so good, he well knew, and with a stab in his side he knew he would have to face up to Ruben concerning it all before it was over, but his male desires burned inside him, threatening to master him, and each time he decided to do the most logical and expected thing by calling and informing the responsible persons, he saw a glimpse of Ruben laying on the fur bed naked, saw with a flush his dark loins, the savagery of his maleness and he put off calling indefinitely.

Several times he went to the phone, still clinging to his nickel, picked up the receiver then put it back down again.

"What's the matter . . . can't get your call through, Gabe?" the storekeeper said, having noticed Gabriel's maneuvers.

"No, sir," Gabe replied, gathering up his groceries and packing them in his haversack. "The line's busy."

He went home, engrossed in his mood, which his mother instantly noticed, milled about the house, his bedroom aimlessly, avoided conversations with his folks and sister, grunted when they brought up the subject of the snake-biten stranger, and was off again through the swamp, impatient to be with Ruben, where his heart, his soul, his whole world lay.

He had picked up a gallon jug of strawberry wine at a little roadside stand, and as he slushed through the slime he shifted it from one hand to the other, thinking, despite its cumbersome weight, that its drunken powers might well be the weapon he needed to conquor Ruben. If he couldn't have him sober, he would have him drunk, and the scheme made little pricks of guilt run up his spine. It was a loathsome thing to do, he realized, but all his sober reasoning diminished in the presence of Ruben's dark nakedness, his male allure, and things like honor and humanity and rules of society became as nothing to him compared to his sexual hungers.

Gabriel had never wronged a person in the whole of his young, lustful life—always doing what was expected of him by his elders, his teachers at school, and the town's citizens. But he had never met anyone quite like Ruben Russo and,

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now that he had, he began to alter some of his former values. What had once seemed proper and essential no longer held any prominence now that he lusted for Ruben's body. And, caught up in this whimsical preoccupation, ringed within the fire of undisciplined lust, he gladly tossed aside rules which once had seemed so essential and important.

In his wild, unprincipled conquest, driven, rapt, he never bothered to ask himself how his behavior would effect him afterward, or how Ruben would react. Blinded, he saw only the drive, the hunger, the ecstasy of his young folly. That he could be concerned with the aftermath was of no consequence. He saw his lusts as only a means to an end, to take and have Ruben Russo sexually, as he himself wanted him, and beyond that point all logic and reason was struck from his existence. In fact, there was no existence beyond this point. He saw only his own body groping with that of Ruben's, his face buried in the magnificent hollow of Ruben's loins, siphoning his nectar of procreation, like a colt at its mother's flanks, and beyond this point his mind was blank, black, insensible and blind.

He did not consider his own fate in exchange of his bargain for sex, the ironic fatality of it, and had he considered he would have gone on, groping, scheming, maneuvering to win for himself the lusty body of Ruben. Also, he did not consider the sacrifice, the sacrifice of his great loss in exchange for sex, the loss of values, of proper perspective, nor the risk he would be taking in order to win and have Ruben as he willed.

Gabriel wanted Ruben so thoroughly that he was now drugged on the mere essence of this want. He moved in a haunted limbo as one high on weed, frantic for the realization of one goal, to pursue and take hold of it and to feast on it, to devour it until it no longer existed in his desire or, if it did remain, a thing spoiled for him in the taking.

So, as he went through the gathering dusk, he went with the stupor of a fugitive armed for some fierce thievery, a crime to commit, with as much emphasis placed on the

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doing as a man on his way to do a murder. He could already taste the blood of the kill in his mind, which spurred him on like a driven madman.

When he had crossed the lake in the little dugout and was mooring it to the wharf, he saw Ruben in the doorway, just as he had left him that morning, as if he had remained constantly and patiently at vigil. He was seated on the top rung of the steps, still clad in shorts, and one leg thrust up over the other one lay exposed his underthigh, and at the sight Gabriel's fingers trembled so he could barely tie the knot in the mooring rope.

As he went up the sandy incline to the cabin, Ruben greeted him with a broad grin, and this little casual gesture, magnified by Gabriel's deep adoration for him, went swiftly to his lonely heart.

"How was your trip?" Ruben asked readily, trying to get up as Gabriel came up the steps.

"Okay," Gabe replied, setting Nero on his perch. "We can pass some of the time with this," he added, holding up the gallon jug of strawberry wine for Ruben to see. He continued on into the cabin as Ruben stumbled after him, catching hold of the chair and table for support. He took off his pack, laid it on the table and began to sort out the supplies.

"You aiming to get me drunk?" Ruben asked, as he took the jug and squinted at its ruby color.

Gabriel flushed. It seemed that Ruben read his mind. And he wondered if his intentions were that transparent. So he quickly tried to cover up by saying, "I was raised on strawberry wine myself, like a baby drinking milk."

"No wonder you're so . . . so . . . what's the word? So passionate!" Ruben chidded, which Gabriel mistook for praise. He swelled his chest with manly pride, his love renewed by Ruben's impression of him. And treacherously he considered if Ruben saw the same things in his body as he did in Ruben's, that identical currents flowed, that desire magnetized them as one, as their minds thought as one.

This is a common enough mistake by all lovers in pursuit

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of their sexual choice, to think their victims possess the identical feelings and frustrations in return to theirs, and that victory . . . the victory they have promised themselves . . . will come all the quicker for this reason.

Suddenly produced of warm spirited emotions, brimful with quickening of nerveless sensations which tingled to his very toes, Gabriel wanted to prolong this conversation which focused so pleasantly on him, his secret desires, and he asked before he thought, "Do you really think I'm passionate, Ruben?"

Ruben laughed.

"Why," he joked, "you're hot as a pepper pudding!"

The sound of his voice went over Gabriel like warm oil, and this spurred his ambitions to have him, to try him at the first opportunity. And thinking these maddening things, his eyes devoured Ruben standing there above him in the thickening light, his flesh all the more radiant and desirable by the flowing of the rosy glow that seeped in through the opened door.

"What did Nan have to say?" Ruben asked with impatience.

Gabriel breathed heavy, dreading but knowing that their conversation would lead to this. He stirred the coals into a blaze, and poured the cooking pot full of gumbo. Still bending over the fire, so that Ruben could not read the lie on his face, in his eyes, he said after a long silent interval, "She said . . . she said as long as you're in good hands."

"And that was all?"

"Well, she asked about your leg," he lied, still busying himself stirring the pot. "When you would be able to come home."

"And . . . and the Preserve Post, did you tell them?"

Ruben was close to him now, directly behind him, and as Gabe straightened up from the fire their eyes met, held, as if frozen. Ruben's burning with impatience and curiosity, Gabriel's with pain.

"They're going to bring a horse," Gabriel said then, turning to slice hunks of French bread.

"When?"

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Gabriel went to the door, gave Nero a handful of crumbs. Ruben followed him, limping badly. He leaned on the door facing and watched Gabriel out of puzzled eyes.

"When?" he repeated.

"Oh, soon . . . soon," Gabe replied, fidgeting with the hawk.

"How soon?" Ruben insisted, flinging both hands wide.

Gabriel went past him and into the house. He went to the pot and stirred the Gumbo.

"A day or two, Ruben," he answered then, casually. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to get out of here," Ruben stormed, sitting down on the edge of the bunk. "Hell, Gabe, I want to get back to work, to my wife!"

Ruben came over and stood in front of him. Gabe gazed at him with futile, hungry eyes. He wanted him so unmercifully, and to hear him talking about leaving made it all so hopeless.

"Why don't you like it here with me?" he blurted out, a little annoyed that things were not going to his satisfaction, that no matter how much he did or how hard he worked to make him comfortable, nothing seemed to work. The harder he tried the more it seemed that Ruben pulled away.

Ruben looked up at him and there was a deplorable look in his eyes, a look that stabbed Gabriel in the heart.

"Good God, Gabe!" Ruben half-shouted, his nerves strung, the enormous pain in his leg adding immensely to his misery and impatience. "I like it here, yes. But I need to get out of here, back home where I belong. Don't you understand that, boy?"

Desolation fell away in Gabriel's mind, and the word *boy* infuriated him—plus Ruben's longing to free himself of him, this cabin, and his primitive world.

Suddenly, seemingly defeated, with the thump of his aching heart drawing unmercifully on his every nerve, Gabriel, like so many of his fiery kin who had lost their necks because they could not keep their heads, flung out at him, "What do you expect of me? I've done everything I know how to make you enjoy your stay here while your leg

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heals. I've hiked back and forth to St. Martinville and hauled back supplies so that you could eat, I've bought medicine for you leg, went and got you out of the swamp! You'd have died out there if it wasn't for me! Why, I could be at home right now, having a good time, out dating, shows, dancing, if it wasn't for you! How ungrateful can you get!"

There was a sudden hurt in Ruben's eyes and he stood up and, reaching out anxiously, took Gabriel by the arm.

"I know I sound ungrateful," he said, his voice oddly trembling. "I realize you have done a lot for me, are still doing for me, and I do appreciate it, Gabe, honest, even though I may not show it. I won't ever forget you for what you've done for me, saving my life, twice actually, feeding me, bathing me, doctoring me. A man don't forget that sort of thing from another man—if he is any man at all. You've been an angel right out of heaven, a swamp angel who has saved my life, who is putting me back on my feet again and sending me home well again. No, Gabriel, I do appreciate what you have done, deep down in my heart, and somehow I'll show you how much."

At the sound of Ruben's quiet voice and what he said, something of Gabriel's anger faded and he looked up into his eyes, his own naked with pleadings, his own desperate yearnings, and he said raspingly, "Ruben, do you mean that, honest?"

"Yes," Ruben answered, gazing fondly down at him. "I meant every word. You're my best friend, in my book. And you keep doing what you're doing, get me back on my feet, and I will prove to you how much I care. Give me that chance."

Suddenly elated, mistaking Ruben's declarations to mean something else, Gabriel returned to the sparkling ebb of life, galvanized into doing untold tasks for Ruben if . . . if in return he got what he wanted.

Feeling suddenly warm and satisfied, with everything to hope for from Ruben, his goal all but complete, he stirred about getting supper, worked like a spirited elf, all under

Ruben's attentive gaze. And under the glowing gold of the oil lamp they ate, speaking of small trivial things which made no sense whatsoever, all within the realm of this primitive forest, the sounds of the night breaking their silences and adding to the peaceful harmony of it all.

When they were through they sampled the strawberry wine, Ruben propped up on the great fur bed, and Gabriel seated in the straight-backed chair before the flickering hearth blaze, both men completely naked, the reflections of the flames playing over their hard male bodies, enhancing their grave beauty, the ferocity of what they represented to nature and to life. Sensuous because of this deep primeval beauty, sinewy, virile, they seemed to merge there in the light, to belong, to fit. It was as if nature had produced them for this purpose, partners of the unfenced wilds, being whatever they were amid the tranquil episodes of civilization, but here, in this cabin, in these ghost-haunted swamps, two males paired and made complete. Their male personalities seemed to pull one into the other, with only conviction to keep them apart, seemed to blend like blood. And the night pressing in upon them only heightened this union, the Gulf winds, the fragrance of early spring, the tiny furry lives that went on somewhere out there in the darkness.

When they had gorged themselves on strawberry wine, and every vein ran molten with sensuous sap, Gabriel got up and, going to the bed, pretended to examine Ruben's leg.

Ruben's body was stretched out over the sea of brown fur, his huge, heavily veined arms behind his head, his thighs opened invitingly. As Gabriel sat between them, squeezing the muscle around the snake bite, he had a full-fledged view of Ruben's groin, the slab of raw meat that lay there dormant in the nest of curly black hair, his seeds which hung so limply warm, until they were half buried in the fur. And, since Ruben's eyes were closed, he could look his fill, could devour his dark animal beauty to his heart's content.

A tremor, he braved every conviction to let his hands

wonder. Fortified too on the rich wine, with every emotion expertly keyed to passion, his whole body a molten flame, Gabriel let his hand slide up Ruben's leg, past the swollen snake bite to his knee, where he fingered his kneecap, then up, maneuvering inward along his soft thigh, up until his fingers, but the tip ends, touched Ruben's huge seeds. With every nerve shaking as if he stood in a gale, his hand went over the dangling seeds where he cupped them lovingly. Ruben squirmed and opened his eyes.

"Behave yourself, boy," he chided, laughing softly, his neatly trimmed mustache going down over polished white teeth.

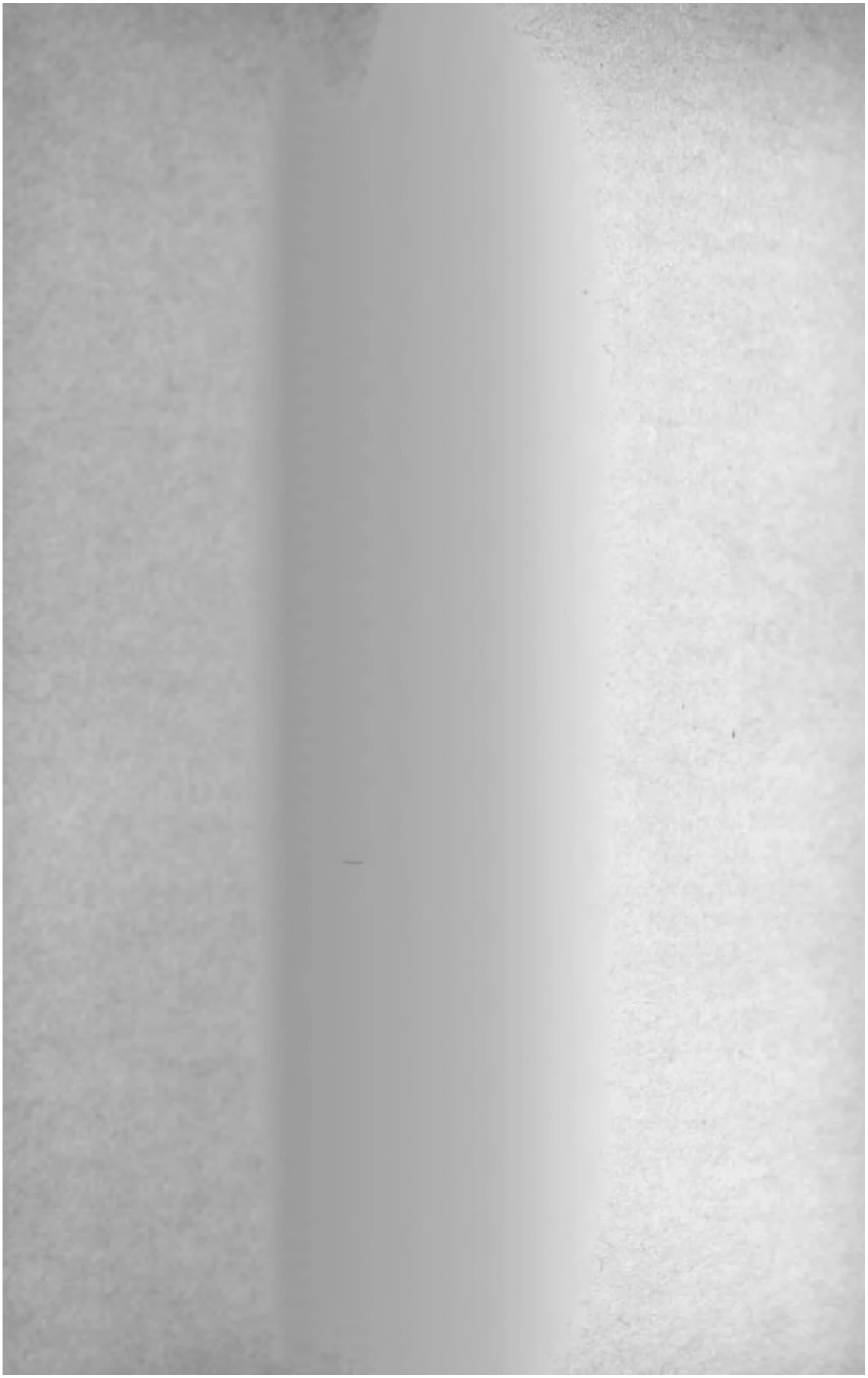
Crimson, ashamed, Gabriel quickly withdrew his hand.

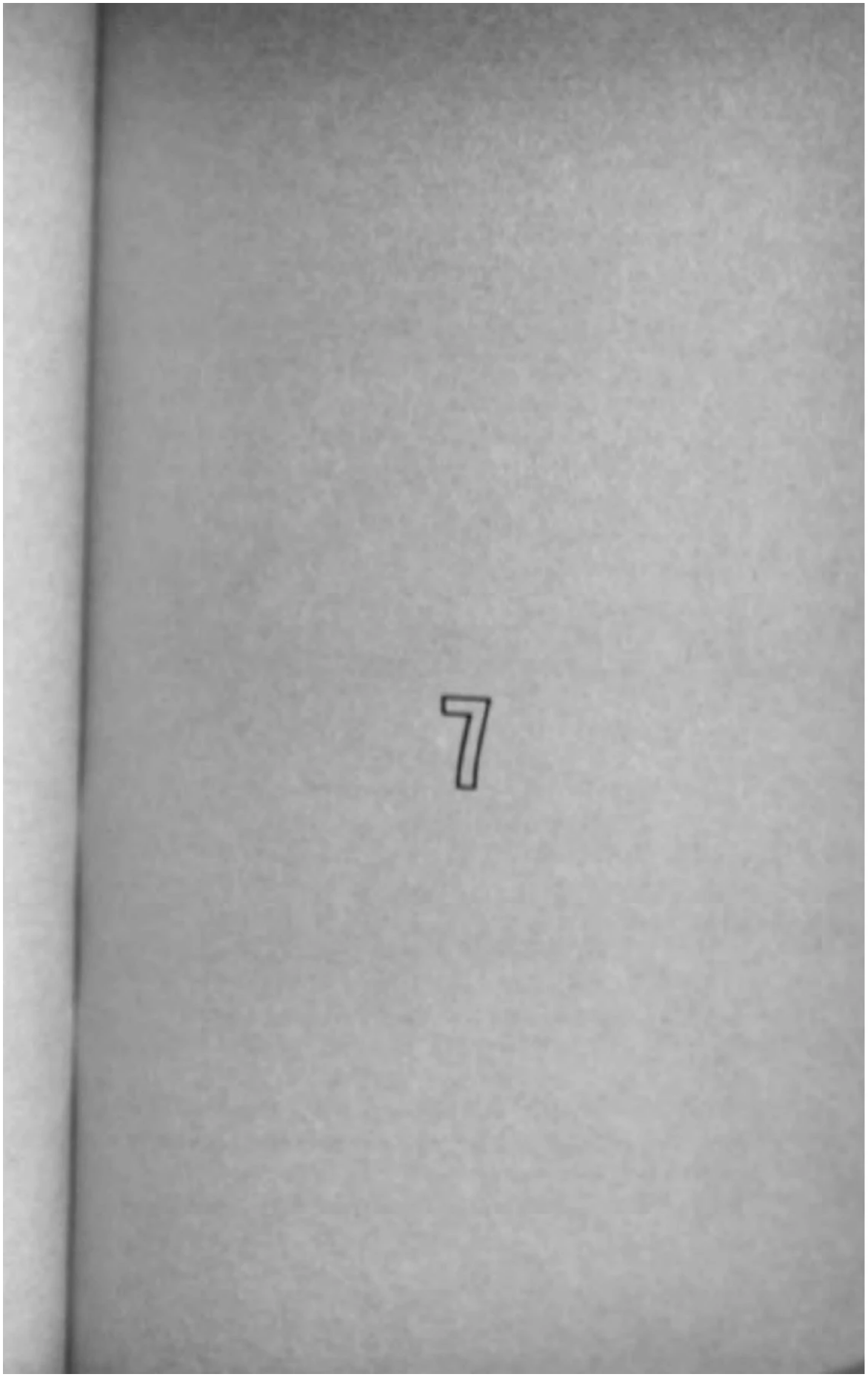
"If you want to play with something, then massage my legs," Ruben suggested, his voice but a low whisper.

With a stirring of needed hope, Gabe began to massage his legs, one at a time, then both at once, letting his trembling hands run the length of them, from his protruding ankle bones up to where his fingers could close along the edges of his pubic hair, making broad, determined sweeps, feeling with raw ecstasy the roll of his hard muscles, enjoying with a wild rapture every movement, for he realized Ruben was enjoying it. His eyes were closed again, and the expression of his facial features, emblazoned by the firelight, was one of contentment and bliss. A little half-smile was on his lips, and his arms folded back behind his head gave to the overall of his body that relaxed, comfortable look bordered on sensuousness and relief.

So, in this manner, Gabriel passed the hours of the night, feeling the rich and round contours of Ruben's body, memorizing through shear rhapsody his every muscle, every beautiful plane. And when he became so weary he could hardly move his own body, and he saw Ruben through a veiled, golden blur, he curled up drowsily in the hollow of his thighs and slept, contented, at least momentarily, without taking him, basking in his male nearness, the ferocity of his warmth. And when Ruben moved during his sleep, he moved, it seemed, only in lovely positions which

hemmed Gabriel's body in with his, his huge thighs entangling with Gabriel's thighs, his arms, his torso, each changing of his body on the warm fur folding Gabriel to him, and with the inconsequential rhythm of a glorious, sexual dream.

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Because Gabriel had so ruthlessly lied to Ruben about the phone calls, during the immedaite days which followed, he tried everything he knew to keep Ruben comfortable and content.

Though his leg healed rapidly, Ruben still limped, and there was enough poison retained in his blood system to keep him with spasmodic fever and restlessness. With a crude crutch Gabe had made for him, he tried to follow Gabe everywhere; sunned out on the wharf, went boating, fished, swam a little, and idled his time away watching Gabriel feed the pigeons, the coon, and bag game when it came near.

During these anxious times, ever watchful, Gabriel stole glances at his male beauty, eyed him like a mother hawk with its young, never allowing Ruben to venture beyond sight of the cabin, fearful he may take to the swamps again, and probably out of his life forever.

That he was doing Ruben an unforgivable wrong he was constantly aware, and each time he devoured Ruben's nakedness, his soulful glances, the hurt look in his eyes, he felt this wrongness a hundredfold. Yet, living in constant dread that he would lose Ruben if he confessed, he remained quiet, went about the cabin in his daily rituals as if nothing was wrong, and kept saying, "They'll be here soon with a horse," whenever Ruben questioned him about anyone coming to his rescue. "You're too impatient, Ruben," he would add, trying to shift the blame to Ruben rather than himself, and the days slipped one upon another, and each morning and evening Ruben would stand at the doorway and peer out anxiously over the horizon, searching for horses and a rider that would never come.

These despairing looks, this woebegone expression on Ruben's face, his constant look of disappointment, almost wrung tears from Gabriel's eyes, he adored him so much, and knew he was wronging him so much. But stronger than his wrong was his deep, mysterious love, and he could not, would not deny himself this. So as time lapsed he looked

on Ruben more often, feasted on him, and with each forlorn gaze with more intensity and depth. For as each dawn and sunset brought Ruben more to the end of his convalescence, Gabriel feared his loss, and with that fear he grew sullen and preoccupied, almost to silence, so panged his sore heart, and his feelings of guilt at times were so strong, so impelling, that he could not look at Ruben without flinching or altering his gaze.

Ruben too began to grow more silent, his expression taking on a troubled, somber look. The playful light left his eyes, he rarely smiled, and when he did it was a forced smile, as if only to tolerate Gabriel with a blanded over friendliness, a cool friendliness that was turning colder by the day. This change bothered Gabriel to no end, and each time he looked at Ruben and discovered him looking at him . . . looking with hard, cold eyes . . . a hollow emptiness fell in his heart and, filled with the enormity of his love, he longed to get on his hands and knees before him, confess everything, tell him why he had lied, set him free, but he could not, would not. He wanted Ruben so much he believed he would kill him in order to keep him from returning to his wife, his job, civilization, and he rode over his emotions, keeping them in check, determined to have Ruben as long as he could keep him.

And because he wanted and loved him so, and because each day brought him nearer to their existence together, the more maddeningly he wanted him. He could not even glance at Ruben without his emotions going rampant, without filling up with sexual desires, and there were times when he did not think he could restrain himself from flinging himself at Ruben, to have him sexually by force. But something of his past reportment, his rearing, something of unforgivable logic, cooled his ravenous lusts, and to fill this wanton gap within him, to keep it under control, he did little favors for Ruben—cooked him choice game over an open spit out on the sand bar, brought him slices of watermelon cooled in the lake, made him a blackberry pie, shaved and bathed him, trimmed his hair and mustache, massaged him daily . . . a ritual he

loved . . . and kept saying, "Soon . . . soon . . . someone will bring a horse."

But SOON never came, as Gabriel well realized, and each time he said the word to Ruben, terror and heartache fell in his throat, and he choked the lies as if he was being crammed with gall.

One night, after they had eaten, and had drank the last of the strawberry wine, Ruben rose from the fur bed and went to the opened door of the cabin. He stood there for a moment naked, his gaze locked toward the west, stood there saying nothing, while Gabriel, dousing the fire with cold ashes, watched him from the kind safety of the darkness.

At that moment he felt more sorry for him than at any time since he had met him, felt Ruben's unhappiness, his loneliness, his homesickness because of the great love he possessed, harbored for him. And because of Ruben's unhappiness, the grieving he had inflicted upon him selfishly, putting him off day after day, building in him a false hope, he realized painfully that he could not hurt him any longer. He realized at this sad moment that he loved and wanted him too much, not only sexual love but spiritual love, to go on hurting the one person left in his life. For now that they had been together for so long, his wild sexual urges had altered somewhat, though strong these impulses were, and something of the love of heart and soul had taken its place.

Firstly, he had wanted only his hard, magnificent body. But not now, not tonight. Now, for some unknown reason, he wanted his love, his friendship, his respect.

Before, when they had first met, respect seemed not important, not his respect for Ruben but Ruben's respect for him. Now, tonight, it oddly mattered somehow, mattered a great deal, for now that he knew acutely that he loved him spiritually, longed for his bodily presence, his wanton gaze, the quiet tenor in his voice, he wanted Ruben to admire and respect him in return.

Now, watching him standing forlornly at the cabin door, looking absently away at his own private world, longing to

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be in that world, a world that did not consist of him, that did not include him in any degree, he felt that Ruben hated him, knew of the lies that lay beneath his cunning and, suddenly, he wanted to alter all that, to put things straight between them before it was too late.

Rising slowly, he went to the doorway and, with Ruben's naked back to him, he said softly, though hurtingly, "They're not coming . . . ever."

Ruben turned abruptly and gave him stare for stare.

"What do you mean . . . they're not coming?"

Gabriel gulped, seeing all his tormenting lies and hating himself miserably for them.

"Ruben," he said, his voice trembling, "I didn't make those calls."

"What?" Ruben cried, his voice so loud it startled Nero on his perch, and he quarreled back rakishly.

Ruben's gaze fell on him like sharp daggers, and they fairly blazed in the dying embers of the hearthfire. He suddenly looked grotesque and terrible there in the flickering reflections, and this frightened Gabriel so it felt as though his hair stood on end.

"I didn't call your wife or your place of employment," he tried to explain, his voice hardly above a whisper. "They don't know, so they won't be bringing a horse."

"Goddamned, boy, why?" Ruben stormed, his arms spread ape-like, his huge fists clenched.

"I couldn't . . . I just couldn't," Gabriel stammered, tears beginning to form at the corner of his eyes.

"But why . . . WHY?"

His voice was so impulsively loud Nero fluttered again on his perch, his huge wings making nervous shadows on the firelit walls. He cowed, and the sound was startling and petrifying.

"Ruben . . . Ruben," Gabe tried to begin his voice failing and faultering. "I just couldn't let you go . . . go back to them, when I wanted, needed you so."

Ruben kept his steady, beaded gaze on him, his expression a mask of hideousness.

"But you knew I had to go back, to my wife, my job.

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You knew that, Gabriel, now didn't you?"

Gabe looked up at him, a long steady look.

"Yes . . . I knew that."

"Then why didn't you call? Why didn't you let them know, at least my wife? She could have gotten help. I can't stay here the rest of my life. Are you slap crazy mad, boy?"

"I know that now," Gabriel managed to say thoughtfully, when it was too late, and now seeing how ridiculous it all looked, how it must look to Ruben who stood above him in the dim, golden light, no less the god he had first known and worshipped. "I know you must hate me, Ruben, and most of all I don't want you to hate me. Please, Ruben, don't hate me?"

"I don't hate you, Gabe," Ruben whispered, a little less angered now, the dull apathy in his eyes retaining their former dazzle. "But that's not the point. I should hate you for not calling my wife, my job; I should beat the living hell outta you. But what I don't understand is why you didn't get help. Doctoring me is one thing, and I've been grateful to you for that, but this fool notion you've had of keeping me here . . . why?"

"Because . . . because I . . . I love you," Gabriel managed to say, his heart in his eyes, every vein in his body throbbing at full pulse.

Ruben glared hotly at him, his eyes like cold glass.

"Shit!"

At that one despicable word, Gabriel jumped, and his devouring gaze sought Ruben's, a look so cold he turned his gaze away.

"I know it sounds terrible!" he cried. "But it's the truth! I . . . I love you, and I can't help it. Hate me if you will, even kill me with your bare hands, but it is the truth!"

"Oh, Gabe . . . Gabe! What a mess I'm in." Ruben went to the bed, and sprawled down on the soft brown fur. "You don't even know the meaning of the word . . . not even dry behind the ears!" He leaned wearily, placed his elbows on his bare knees and bowed his face in his hands.

Gabriel went to the bed and stood over him, his hand on his heart, looked down at him with desperation flowing

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through him.

"I know that I love you, want you," he declared bluntly, stating a fact. "Maybe you don't know that I care, but I do, Ruben, more than anyone has ever cared or will ever care."

Ruben looked up at him and cried, "How do you know?"

"Because I know myself, what I want," said Gabe, searching Ruben's gaze for the fatal sign. "I have never wanted anyone like I want you, the way I want you. That is why . . . that is why I could not make those calls, for I knew I would lose you if I did."

"Good God, Gabe! You wouldn't have lost me," Ruben said, burying his face again, his voice muffled, distant. "I would have come back to see you, once I was at home and on the job for a while. We could have spent weekends together, here at your cabin, hunted, fished. I'd have liked that."

At the sound of Ruben's faraway voice, speaking of him and Ruben doing things together, Gabriel saw harshly the ill-timed debauchery of his falseness, his lies, his deception, all that he had gambled on to have Ruben with him and lost. He saw too what he would miss in the future because of this deception, his disloyalty. Even if he could not have had Ruben sexually, at least he could have had him as a lifelong friend, but now he realized he had blundered it all. Standing there above him, noticing Ruben's broad, naked shoulders slumped forward, his enormous thighs, his gallant head in his hands, he wanted to stoop and gather him into his arms, wanted to call back all that he could have had, and suddenly he saw what a complete fool he must appear in Ruben's eyes.

"Oh, Ruben," he cried, sinking to his knees before him and laying a hand on his smooth, brown hair. "You don't know what it's like being like this, like me. It's been torture wanting you, seeing you naked every day and night, and not having you. I've been out of my mind."

"Just what made you think I would let you have me?" asked Ruben, raising his head and glaring at him. "You

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know, I've got a wife. I love women . . . not men."

"That night," Gabriel stammered, taken back by his glaring eyes. "That night you told me about those other men . . . at those clubs."

"Oh, that," Ruben sneered, waving a hand in mock charade. "I was nothing but a kid then, and blowing me didn't mean we had to love one another."

"But if you let them . . . then at least you could have let me."

Ruben sat up, placed both hands on his hips, and gave Gabe stare for stare.

"So that's what this is all about," he mused, a sad twinkle coming to his eyes. "You want to get between my legs, and because you thought you couldn't, because you thought I wouldn't let you you decided not to make those calls."

Gabriel blinked, fidgeted with his hands clumsily.

"Well, that is part of it, Ruben, and you knew it since that night. You know I've wanted you from the first. And I knew if I called they would take you away from me, and that you would never come back."

"Well, you've been all wrong, at cross purposes haven't you? Gabe, listen, when I did that with those men I was only a kid. Since then I've grown up, fallen in love, married. I don't like queers. I didn't even like them then. The only reason I did it was because I was just a KID, looking for kicks. But that's all beside the point. When I came to your cabin I wasn't looking for that sort of thing. I appreciate what you have done for me . . . as a friend only . . . and not this other. I had no idea when I got bit that I was landing up in a shack with a queer kid."

Gabriel shot him an insolent glance.

"That's cruel! You didn't have to say that!"

Ruben feined a grin.

"Well, maybe I didn't. If so I'm sorry. But you have done a despicable thing, not making those calls like you faithfully promised. And I am surprised at you, and also disappointed. I considered you a better boy than that. I

ought to turn you over my knee and spank hell outta you."

Gabriel, completely at Ruben's mercy, hung his head in shame.

"I hated to do it, Ruben, honest. I thought about it a long time before I decided not to call them. But I have never had a friend, not like you, and I needed you, wanted your body, and I wanted you to want me in return, to like me, to care. It was the only thing I knew to do in order to keep you here beside me."

Ruben glared at him for a continuous time, then his expression waned to that of friendliness and genuine concern.

"Gabe," he began, his voice thoughtful and kind, "you don't win and keep friends by telling them lies and breaking promises to them. As I have said repeatedly, I like you and maybe I would have come across to you, I don't know, haven't given it much thought. If I thought your mouthing my rod would make you the least bit happy I'd say go ahead and suck it. But I know that wouldn't make you happy—not a robust, healthy boy like you."

"But it would! It would!" Gabriel cried, bending close to Ruben, his hand on his widespread knees. "If I had you only once—only once—I think I could live on the memory of it for the rest of my life!"

Ruben shrugged.

"No you couldn't. If you are selfish enough to try and keep me out here against my will, then you are selfish enough to want it a second time, then a third, and on and on. And I could not, would not keep giving myself to you like that. In the first place I don't like it all that well, and in the second place I have a wife to satisfy. Memory is a poor substitute for sex, Gabe. Memory wears thin after a while, and you seek out others to fill in the hollow places. That is why I've been reluctant to let you have me. I'm afraid that if you had me you would only go to others, and in time would become nothing but a faggot out on the street corners, and I would be the guilty one which had contributed to your downfall, and I don't want that to happen to you, Gabriel. Your a fine-looking boy, vigorous

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with good health and manliness, and I wouldn't want to see that in you . . . ever . . . understand?"

Gabriel nodded as he understood too well. Ruben did not want him, would never want him, actually, and his kind words, his voice, only brought out the untimeliness of his love, the ugliness of it, utterly destroying the beauty of it as he had dreamed in his young and callow heart. Ruben was trying to make him see how wrong it was, when he didn't consider it wrong at all. It was a thing he wanted, vastly needed, and he saw no great harm in taking Ruben's body if it brought him untold pleasures.

"So, I've ruined everything," he said meekly, not daring to look at him. "You hate me now, and I don't want that, Ruben. I want your respect for me, your friendship, even if you won't let me have your body."

"Gabriel . . . I do respect you, very much," Ruben whispered. "And, this wanting my body. Isn't this just a whim of yours? Part of your growing up?"

"No!" Gabriel shouted quickly, his every nerve tingling, playing him tricks. "I want you, forever and forever! I will never want anyone but you, Ruben, never! Honest! I know I have been wrong, wrong about not phoning, getting help. But I care for you so much I would have died trying to bring you back to health. I would have let nothing happen to you out here. I would have stood guard over you like a hawk over its young, protecting you, making a lot over you. And I can make you happy, Ruben, honest—not like your wife, not like a woman, but equally in a different way. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you if I thought it would bring you comfort or happiness. I'd sacrifice my whole life if need be."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Ruben lamented tiredly, scratching his silken hair. "That sacrificing—and I don't want anyone sacrificing anything for me. You have done enough already—too much!"

"But it wouldn't be a sacrifice," Gabriel insisted, his gaze tormentingly on Ruben. "I'd love every minute of it, honest. I'd be your slave, Ruben, if only you would let me."

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"Gabe . . . Gabe . . . I don't want you to be my slave. I want you to be a man, walk like a man, talk like a man, act like a man. I don't want you grappling between my legs at what you think you want. I don't want you to stoop to such . . . such trashy doings as that. I admire and respect you and I want to keep that . . . God! Let me keep that!"

"Then you think all that is so . . . so awful?"

"Not awful, Gabe, but degrading. A man between another man's legs! How could I face you afterward? You . . . turning queer over me!"

"But it wouldn't be queer," Gabriel deplored. "Not with us, not you and me. It would be two real men, giving to men, a thing so beautiful and strong that we'd never separate, something so wonderful that nothing could pull us apart."

"So that's the way you see it," Ruben said, and his lips twisted down at one corner. "Two real men . . . something strong and beautiful. It could be like that, Gabe, but rarely if ever is, I would imagine. You're so young, so impressionable. You think it beautiful now, but when you're older, say my age, what then? You have a certain obligation to yourself, Gabe—not just to society. In doing this, you are cutting yourself off from so much. You will be giving up so much. I don't mean by merely sucking on my rod you will be giving up so much, but I mean in time, what you will become, and though this may not seem important to you now, it will later. Men among men, and that sort of thing. Men look down on other men who do these things with men. Someday you'll want to have a good job, a wife, children, then you'll look back on this with shame and regret. Just taking me may not be that bad, but what about in the future, when I am no longer around, what about the others you will grow to want and will take?"

"There aren't going to be any others," Gabriel replied. "I only want you, and will never want anyone but you. Honest, Ruben. I am young, that is true, but I am alone a lot, and I think a lot, and I read a lot, and I do know what I want. I know it is selfish for me to want you, when you

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belong to someone else. I know it is wronging your wife, Nan. I know you naturally love and want women. But if we could compromise. If when we are here, in my cabin, by this lake, you and I could be something else, just for a little while, giving ourselves to one another, caring, enjoying each others bodies, then, on returning to that other life, become different, as we were before. Is that too much to ask, Ruben? If I find pleasure in your body, taking you, and you find pleasure in giving, then what's the harm? Then, locked away here, alone where the world cannot see and hear us, couldn't we find happiness, and couldn't all this become beautiful . . . just for us?"

"Your persistence overwhelms me," Ruben declared, and looking away, he stared at the dying flames in the hearth as if, in them, he read all the answers. Then he looked again at Gabriel. "If I gave you myself, if I did let you suck me, what would that prove?"

"It may prove a lot of things," Gabriel said, as his hopes mounted, as his spirit lifted on bright, silvery wings. "First, that two men could come together in sex . . . like Alexander and Hephaestion . . . and secondly . . . that I firmly believe you will like what I do and that we can be together always."

Ruben let out a soft laugh which seemed to fill the dark room.

"And I would divorce my wife and come live with you here in this cabin, and all would be rosy sunsets and living happily ever after."

"No," Gabriel whispered, not hopeful of paradise. "Not that. But it might impress you enough to spend weekends with me. It just might."

"You never give up, do you?"

"I cannot afford to give up, where you and I are concerned," Gabriel confirmed. "I must keep trying again and again, until I have succeeded, or until you beat me up and tell me to go to hell."

"Then what?"

"I'll quit trying."

"All because of my rod . . . you'd go to that extreme?"

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"It's more than that, Ruben—much more," Gabriel went sadly on, still on his knees in the ruse of the gallant lover. "Having you like that would mean having the very best part of you, the most precious thing you can give. Too, I would be having and enjoying your beautiful body, your strength. Your strength would give me strength. Your beauty would give me beauty. And in having you I would be having all of you, your every muscle, your every vein, your every ounce of warmth, your heat, your thoughts, and even maybe your heart. Surely while I was taking you I would be having your heart, if but for a little while. For the whole part of you would be under concentration, your every emotion playing out the desires I would stir in you, and when it was over I would have known everything about you, the manner in which you breathed just before you came, your sweat, the way your muscles and veins drew in and out, the way your hips would rise and fall, the way your eyes would glow, the way your expression would melt and grow more beautiful when you filled my mouth with the finest thing in your body. Oh, Ruben!" he cried, moving still closer to him, "give me this one chance. Just lie back on the bed and let me do the rest."

"Whew! But you're a dreamer!" Ruben cried, pushing Gabriel aside and standing up. He went to the doorway and looked out, his gaze glued westward. Toward civilization and home!

Gabriel got up from the floor and went to him, and together they stood, mutely staring out into the night, both as if listening to the multitudinous sounds pouring into the cabin from the fragrant darkness: a cricket in the loft, a grasshopper in a clump of dandelion beside the steps, the monotonous crying of leopard frogs, a whippoorwill cooing for its mate, the rise and fall of the water as it struck the sandy shore, the bobbing of the little dugout on the wharf.

"If I let you have me," Ruben asked, not looking at him, instead keeping his starry vigil toward St. Martinville and New Iberia, "if I let you do to me what you want, what about those calls? Would you then get help?"

"Would I lose you forever?" Gabriel answered his

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question with a question, daring to lay his hands on Ruben's hips.

Ruben turned and faced him, and his beaded eyes in the darkness were hard and determined, like a man facing dueling pistols and not expecting to win.

"No, you wouldn't lose me," he assured, looking straight into Gabriel's uplifted eyes. "I'd come back, visit you . . . every time I got the chance."

Gabriel gave him a long, heartfelt look. This was his crucial hour, and at the idea of Ruben promising him his body, after he had waited, had yearned so long, the breath left his lungs, and every nerve tingled through his loins. His gaze stole a glance at Ruben's crotch, devoured the huge instrument dangling there for his ready use, a marvelous toy nestled in its wiry bed of hair, and he went faint at the possibility.

"You know," said Ruben, "sooner or later someone is going to come looking for me, then where will you be? Don't you think it is better to do it my way? You'll get what you want and I'll get back home to my wife and my job . . . so, what you say?"

"No lies . . . no tricks?" Gabriel asked, in his own defense.

Ruben laughed.

"Look who's talking!"

"My father has a horse," Gabriel suggested, the tone in his voice low and gutted with skepticism. "I could go fetch him and you could bring him back later."

Ruben beamed.

"That's good enough. Then, I'd have to come back here, wouldn't I?"

"Yes," Gabriel replied, realizing now, with a quickening of his heart, that this was the only safe and sane way . . . lose Ruben or not.

"Well, let's get on with it then," said Ruben, but with a cold irritation in his voice. And he rubbed his crotch lovingly, in the mock charade of desiring it.

Gabe gave him a curious look, wondered if he was lying. But Ruben's returned, steady gaze contained a measure of

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frankness that shook Gabe to his groin. Now that he was being offered Ruben's body, he did not know exactly how to go about taking him. He just stood there looking down at him, and trembling like a thief.

"Well, what the hell?" Ruben said. "I thought you wanted it. You been bugging me for it long enough. Got lockjaw?"

"I feel funny now," Gabe answered, his gaze frozen on Ruben's crotch.

"Funny how?"

"Like I'm doing something you won't like."

"So?"

"I want you to like it, Ruben, honest."

Ruben kept fondling his own prick, invitingly. Advertising!

"I'll like it . . . you bet."

Gabe stammered. He was like a nervous groom taking a virgin bride on the wedding night.

"I want to do it right," he said with a tremor. "So you'll want us to do it again."

"You'll do okay," said Ruben, the sound of his voice low, passionate. "You ought to do a bang-up job. You've thought about it long enough."

Gabe realized he had placed himself in an awkward position, and all because of his own lustful cunning.

"You really don't mind, Ruben?"

Ruben gave him a go-to-hell look. "Do you want me or not?" He kept playing with his crotch. "Come on, it's all yours."

"I'm cold," Gabe said. His palms and feet felt clammy.

Ruben's gaze mellowed as with mutual understanding. And reaching down, he pulled Gabe to him.

"Come on, we'll warm up together."

Ruben put him at ease. It seemed to be Gabe's cue now. He melted in between Ruben's thighs. Ruben clutched him behind the nape of his neck warmly, and lowered Gabe's head to his crotch.

And there it was all of a sudden. Ruben's cock, bigger and grander than life. In almost a state of prostration,

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spurred now to the activity of fulfillment, Gabe clutched it in his hands, fondled its meaty warmth, watched it grow under his curious burning eyes.

Thinking of it all this time had proven a wondrous occupation. But having it now robbed him of his reason. Anxious as a cub, his face glowing from within by Ruben's huge thighs closing in upon him, Gabe lowered his opened mouth down over the hardening cock, and sopped it up with his tortured lips. The head was gigantic, prowed and edged with a rear rim of thick meat that looked like a battling ram. The opening on the end was so wide he could thrust in the tip of his tongue with but little effort, and utilizing a little pressure on his jaws he could suck up the fleshy head and rim its lovely contours with his tongue. When he did this, caressing those tender regions beneath, where the foreskin connected to a point, Ruben hunched all the more, and wiggled his pelvis from side to side invitingly.

With Ruben's prick sucked up to the hilt now in his mouth, his face buried in the nest of coarse brown crotch hair, Gabe eased his hands with exploring gestures beneath Ruben's firm rump, and got both hands full of hairy cheeks.

With such a firm grip, Ruben's prick locked in the pressures of his slobbering mouth, Gabe went to work with earnest, deliberate effort, firstly to thrill Ruben, then himself. That first chill of guilt, of conscience mellowed the moment his molten mouth came into physical contact with Ruben's organ, and every movement was lovely and natural to him now . . . sublime.

It was as if nature had purposefully fashioned them for the act. They fit together like a piston in warm oil, like the roots of a cypress in the gumbo mud.

Hugging Ruben's rump tightly, and with Ruben gripping Gabe's forearms in a warm, bulldogged grip, they both worked their bodies in preheated unison. Again and again Ruben would press his hairy thighs together, imprisoning Gabe's face in the torrid cavern of hairy flesh, then release them as his rump thrust upward, ramming his prick still

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further into the roof of Gabe's gaping mouth.

Both let out struggling noises, and the rapid sloshing of saliva dripping from Gabe's lips sounded like a churn dasher in milk.

So worked up they became over their delightful task, one giving the other taking, that Gabe was swept up on a hot tide of luxuriant sucking. He became so engrossed he realized and sensed nothing but the doing. Like an animal in a fierce death struggle, locking his fiery prey in the death-lock before administering the kill, he pulled and slobbered and groaned over the huge male tit, eating it with the tenderness of a love kiss.

As he sucked, lapping at the meaty giver of life, sucking away all the moisture, then producing hot saliva again, he worked at his rewarded pleasure like a man who refused to give up, or have enough. He became like a growling, starving animal, gobbling down his blood-red meal before some other starved creature came to claim it from him.

In fact, pulling on Ruben's prick, siphoning like a blood-sucker, gnawing in a tenderness bordering on ferocity, he turned animal. A wild animal too caught up in the wild music of tendon and vein, with all the burning emotions flowing through his whole body in one convulsing, undisciplined rhythm to ever now become tamed.

He had to go on with his flawless task, unrelenting, moving his mouth and his body with all the gyrations of his expected objective until he had sucked up into his burning system the nectar of his prey. Like a pump drawing water out of a deep well, so did he have to hunch and suck the hot extension of raw meat until it gave up its most precious possession.

And in this labor of love, which was as tense, as profound as murder, he became bathed in sweat. It ran down the sides of his face and chin, and down the length of Ruben's prick, and he could taste the salt of his own excretions. His arms and shoulders became sodden and, where Ruben gripped him firmly, their bodies slipped and slid and merged hotly, as though both would melt.

Then, somehow, like an animal that senses the strange, the unfamiliar, Gabe knew when Ruben would sperm. The prick in his mouth suddenly began to swell in size, the head mushroomed out, and Ruben, wreathing and gyrating, let out a blissful sigh.

Hungrily, Gabe clung to Ruben in that last precious second, his arms taut, every vein strutted, his throat expanded ready to take the fill.

Ruben's sperm came in one, long, hot gush, thick as syrup, followed by another and another.

Gabe clung for dear life, fearful of losing a single drop. He drank in full, throaty swallows, relishing the finest of Ruben pouring into his own gut. All his pentup desires, his secret longings, his male love, climaxed in complete fulfillment as he drank Ruben with the sex starvation of his soul.

As Gabe drank the delicious sperm, the warm, thick cream going over his lolling tongue down his throat like molten oil, ecstasy exploded in his loins, and there was a gendering in his rump. He spermed. It roared through his prick and wet the furry bed and his belly in sticky streams.

Sapped of passion now, both men relaxed in pools of their own sweat, still clinging to each other, and with fingers still starved for the touch of living flesh, caressed each other in little casual messages of male love.

Gabe let Ruben's prick slip from his mouth, and he sank his lips down over its low limber state, kissing and sucking at the coarse nest of hair that was, to his soft tongue, like steel wool.

"Did you like it?" he whispered to Ruben, raising his head enough to peer into Ruben's downcast eyes. Their glow had mellowed to the softness of a collie dog's eyes, with strange hypnotic lights to them.

Ruben mumbled back, "It was great!" And added in a low moan of sure bliss, "Didn't know anything could feel so great!"

At that, Gabe patted Ruben's rump with little satisfied pats, now in his belated glory, and began to feel every facet of his body with hot, roving fingers. And his hands

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explored, his gaze following, and he absorbed into his consciousness every wonderful part of Ruben's beauty.

Ruben seemed to enjoy being admired, and he allowed his body to be manipulated in cadence to Gabe's whims.

With the ease of being balanced on waves of water, arms and legs coiling and recoiling, Gabe turned Ruben over on his belly and began to kiss him between the cheeks. There, the dark hair grew in wild mats and held the rich odor of the male. There the aroma dominated and formed a sexual target for Gabe's ambition.

The fragrance drugged Gabe's mind. Overwhelmed, he hugged Ruben's rump firmly and thrust his tongue into the hairy crevice again and again, the saliva dripping until Ruben's rump was shiny wet.

"God! What a thrill!" Ruben moaned, his voice drowned out in the thick fur.

He became sexually aroused again and, with one deft stroke he pivoted Gabe's body onto his belly and mounted him.

Crushed against the cushion of furry pelts, against the softness of live things that had sacrificed their tiny wild lives for his comfort, for human beautification, Gabe felt the enormous weight of Ruben on top of him. His huge derrick-like frame shut out the light and overshadowed his world. And his fierce male beauty and power became both a glory and a fascination, as he could sense Ruben's hard prick wandering, probing for his rump. Then, as if Ruben's prick had eyes of its own, or guided by some primeval knowledge familiar to the male of caveman times, it discovered the slit and slid in like an eel, as easy and gracefully as a shark prowling a cave beneath the tides.

At that first wayward thrust, Gabe sensed a sharp pain like the stab of a blunt knife, and every nerve quivered and recoiled. But only for a moment. Then, as though his senses dulled to the insensitive reaction to anesthesia, painless, he felt, and with sensory delight, Ruben's enormous prick enter his rump. It was as though the walls of his pelvis retracted and gorged with Ruben's hot meat. It was a wondrous sensation, knowing Ruben was taking him

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sexually, like taking a woman!

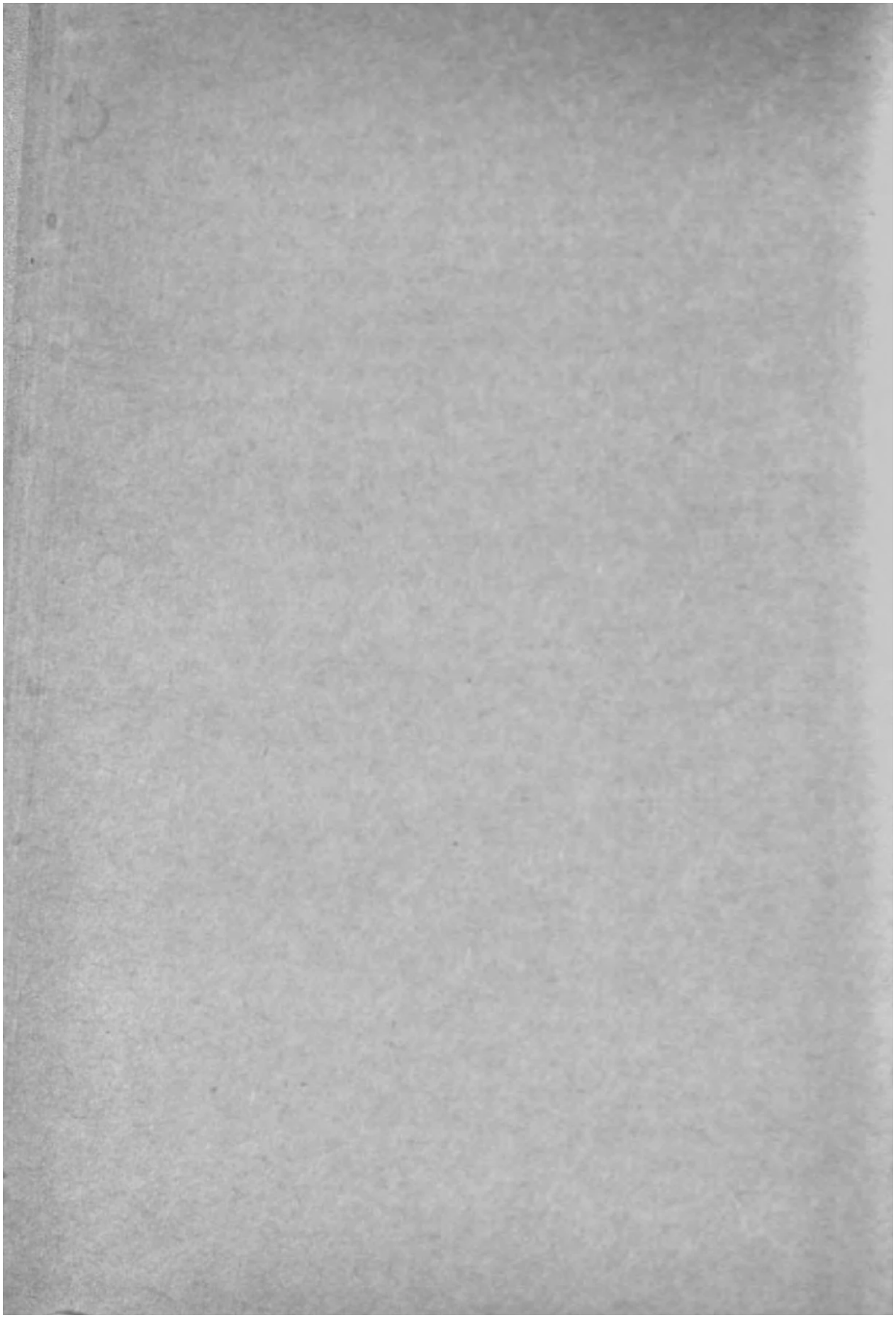
He was being useful to Ruben at last, serving him pleasure by giving him his body, and he relished Ruben's body against his, his thighs thrashing in ecstasy, his muscular arms holding onto him, almost fondly (and how lovingly he could do this), and he raised his rump to give him more! more! more!

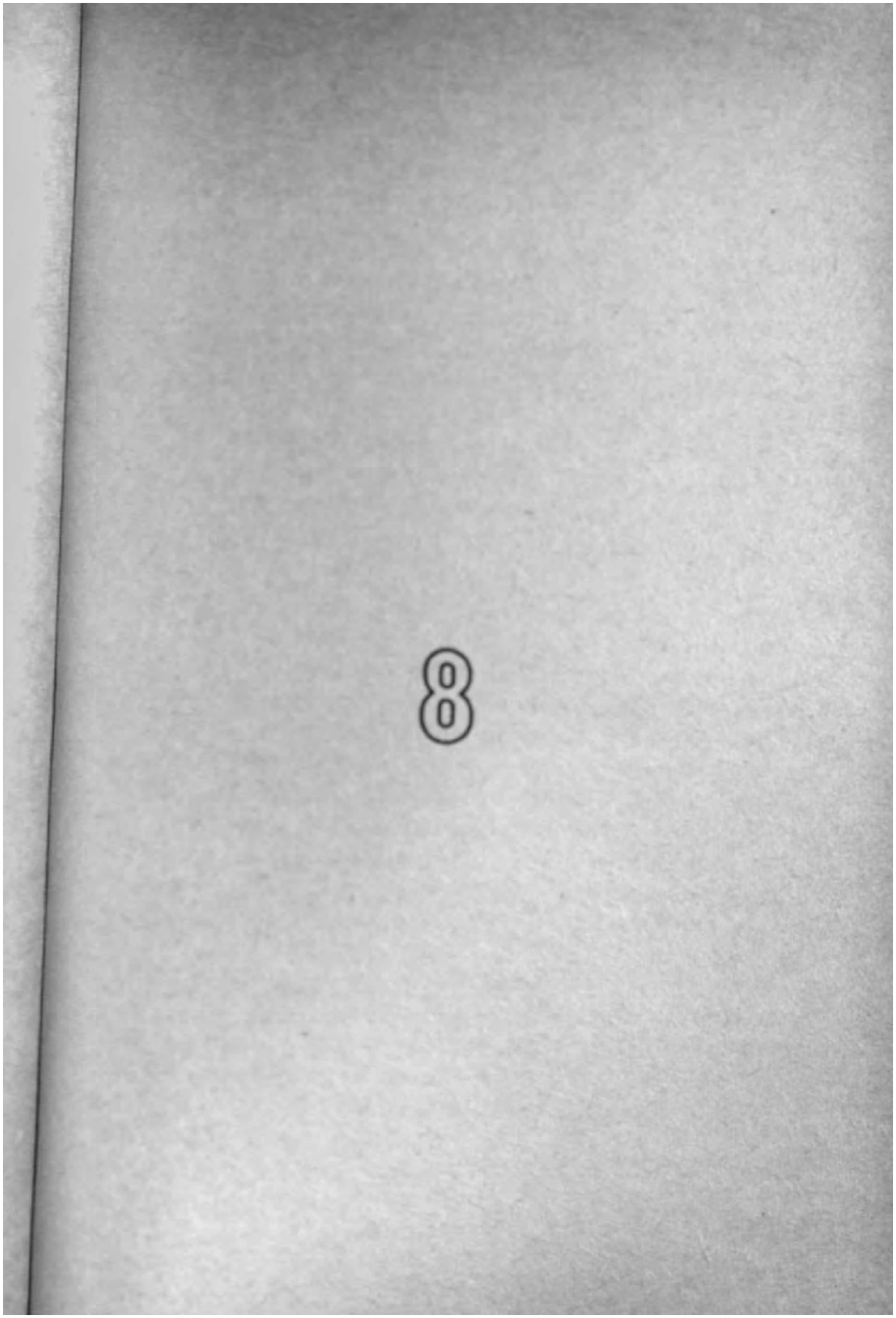
Like a volley of hot flame, Ruben's sperm went up his rectum and flooded his system in sweet streams.

Ruben collapsed in a limp, sweaty heap of spent passion and love.

Sliding to one side, he reached down and eased his hand over Gabe's rump.

"What a tail!" he said in pure bliss.

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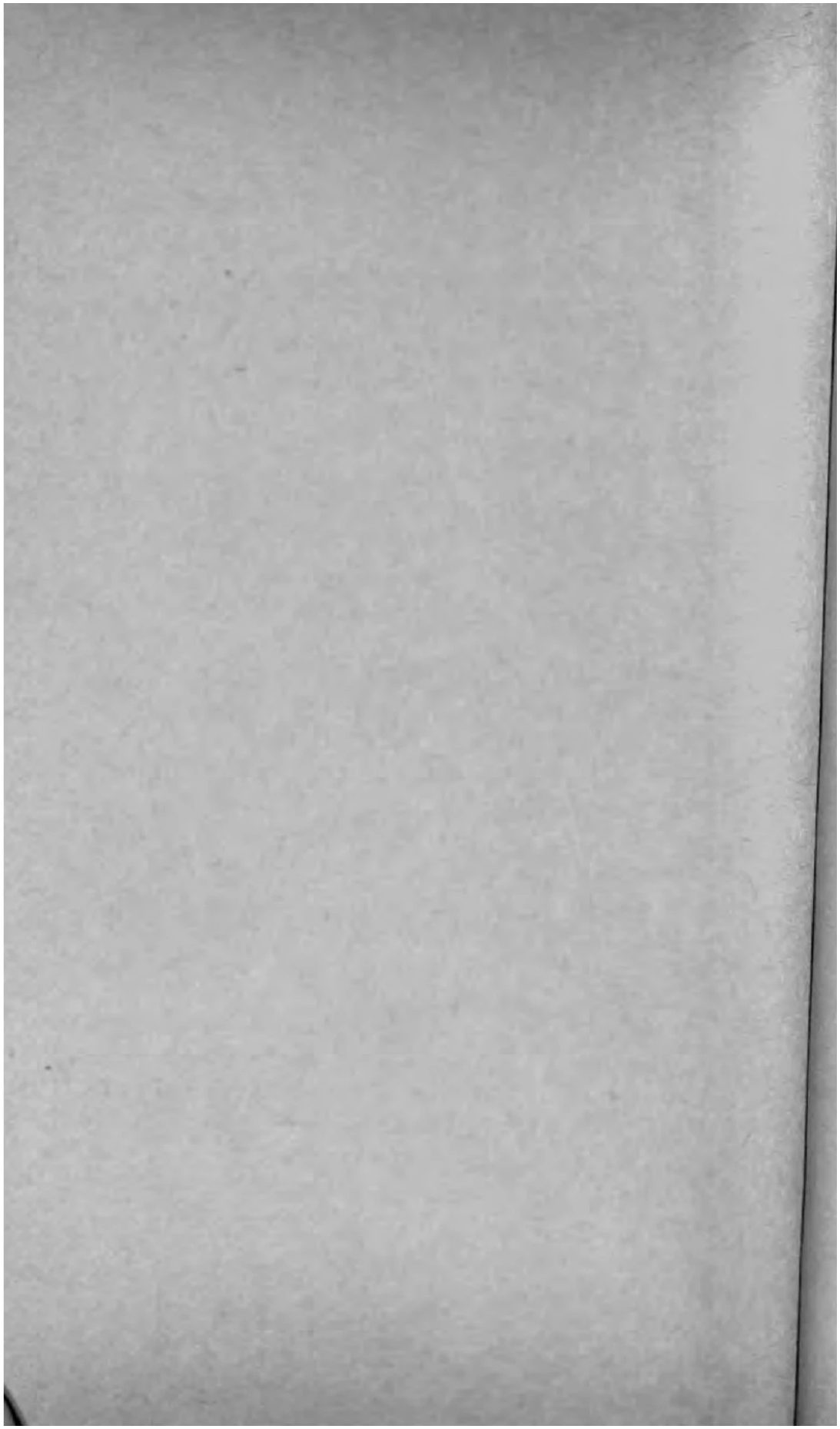

The following morning Gabriel went about his chores whistling, happy as a lark. The memory of the night before was still as fresh on his mind as if it was happening presently, and he could not, did not, want to shrug off the rapture he had encountered with Ruben. Though he had dreamed hundreds of times what it would be like, none of his dreams, even the wildest ones, could come up with the actual experience; those luscious spread thighs, so willing, so inviting, his organ and seeds magnificently sculptured to his loins, protruding in rigid, third-dimensional relief, engulfed in their abode of thick hair, and all his for the taking.

He thought too for the hundredth time the expression on Ruben's face when he first went at it, and the hot glare in his pale blue eyes, thought of his bodily movements, the gyrations from side to side of his pelvis, and the upward thrust as tension and sensation increased. Over and over in his mind poured the wild ecstasy of the climax, with every muscle in Ruben's body twitching frantically, his arms behind his head, the axis of his torso like a white marble statue reclined. He thought too of how Ruben had thrust up his legs, laying them along his humped shoulders, and how his face became immersed in his huge, warm thighs, and the sensation of their feel as he moved up and down, radiating the molten ballast of his body.

All the rapture and lustful sensations he lived again and again, basking in their glory, as he fed the pigeons, the coon, warm-heartedly fed the wild hog, and cleaned the cabin. Out of this burning memory he stitched Ruben's uniform where he had earlier torn the leg to get to his wound, washed it, hung it in the sun to dry, and pressed it with a little traveling iron he heated over the coals in the hearth. When this was completed, he went to his father's farm and returned with the horse. He tied him on the opposite side of the lake, brought over Ruben's saddle and trappings in the dugout, and saddled and bridled him. When he finished and had recrossed the lake in the dugout, he saw

Ruben come out of the cabin and stand on the top rung of the steps.

He was dressed in his clean uniform, all gray and shining like one of those gallant soldiers from some Civil War novel, his black boots shining like new leather, his auburn hair gleaming like the tawny hues of a stallion's flanks, his hat in his hands.

With both their faces a little tinged with guilt from the night before, they got in the dugout and Gabriel rowed them to the opposite shore where the saddled horse stood waiting, busy plucking the lush purple clover that spread like an enormous carpet over the floor of the swamp.

While Gabriel held to the bridle, Ruben climbed into the saddle, then Gabriel tossed him the reins.

"Well, this is it," Ruben said with a trembling voice, as he looked down at Gabriel. Both tried to smile, but failed.

"Yes . . . I reckon it is," Gabe replied, thinking that he had never seen Ruben so handsome than at this sad moment of farewell—how proudly he set in the saddle, his broad shoulders looming up against the cloud-speckled sky, how his gray hat sat at a dashing angle, shading his brow, how his thigh muscles bulged from the shiny saddle, the calves of his legs hard and sensuous above his varnished boots, and once more he thought of the previous night in which he had gloried, the wild primitive essence of it, the rich male smells, the chafing hair, the gross ferocity of male sex and male sperm.

I can't live without him, Gabe's heart cried as his hungry eyes devoured him, drank him, feasted upon his grave handsomeness, perhaps for the last time. *I just can't give him up.*

Ruben then clicked to the stallion, but before he could turn him in the watery trail, Gabriel caught hold of the reins and held him back, his eyes pleading, his heart breaking like the bread of prayer in his chest.

"Ruben, you will come back . . . won't you?" he cried, already feeling his great loss, his absence, the forerunner of the doom he would have to endure in the future without him.

"Yes, Gabriel, I will come back," Ruben assured him. "So I won't say good-bye and I won't thank you for all you've done. I'll do that the next time I see you."

"But it won't be long . . . will it?" Gabriel persisted, still clinging to the bridle. "I mean, not weeks and weeks!"

"A day or two," Ruben cried down from the saddle. "And we'll have a ball!"

"Honest? Honest? Ruben . . . you mean . . . SEX?"

"I'm yours, Gabe!" said Ruben with a dash and a gallant air, and he tipped his gray hat to Gabriel as a soldier would do to a lady. His pale blue eyes contained their sparkle, their merry dazzle, and laughing, he displayed two rows of pearly white teeth. He clicked to the stallion, spurred him in the flanks as he reared and plunged, and both man and horse wheeled and spun like veteran circus performers, a beautiful picture to Gabriel as he watched out of admiration and muted awe. Ruben waved and Gabriel waved back, but only a sad, half wave, the slow movement of his arm like the slow dying in his heart.

Then they were off across the flat swamp, the horse's hoofs making wild splashes in the green water, their shapes merging as one. Gabriel stood watching them sadly, grief-stricken, until they were lost on the horizon, watched as a flurry of sandpipers flew in multitudes after them, blackening the dusk sky, listening as the hollow, empty sounds of the wood Ibis echoed his own heartache and echoed back again and again against the dark wall of woods.

Like a sleepwalker, he climbed into the dugout and went silently across the lake to the wharf. He went up the sandy atoll to the cabin and went in, this time without saying anything to Nero his hawk, without even a peck on his bill. Suddenly, once in the little semidark room he found all the things connected to his and Ruben's life: the huge bed of fur, the tiny window where they had lain gazing at the stars, the hearth with its steady glow, like Ruben's beating heart, the stuffed birds and animals gazing at him from glass eyes, as they must have watched from the darkness while he made love to Ruben, the containers of food, the empty jug of strawberry wine, then back once more to the bed. For a

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timeless time he stood above it staring numbly at its brown turf, so invitingly warm, and suddenly he found unbearable all these tokens of love and, flinging himself on the bed, he cried like a child.

When at last he raised his paining head it was complete darkness outside, the stars were piercing the blackness, and the coals in the hearth were but embers, giving out a soft warm glow which fell on the bed, his nakedness, and again he thought of Ruben. In his grief he stroked the fur, groping, as if searching for the heavy thighs that once so invitingly had lain there, tried to picture him in visions, the sudden emptiness of his life now welling up within him acutely, painfully, and he became lost in the oblivion, immune to everything but the hurt and grief. Life so suddenly had become intolerable for him, an emptiness without a boundary, limitless. Without Ruben, his bodily presence, there was nothing, nothing to live for, hope for, die for, and he realized this heartbrokenly.

So he lay sprawled in the spring darkness, thinking of small things which roared through him, tore at his sore heart. Once he had wanted Ruben so desperately, and in that haunting want he failed to see and appreciate his other values. He failed to see that just having Ruben in his cabin was enough, without love, without sex. Engulfed in the immensity of his sudden emptiness, he pined for him, wanted him here on the bed, seated by the fire, eating with him, sleeping with him, enjoying all the things which kept him occupied while in his presence: bathing him, shaving him, trimming his nails, massaging him, dressing his wound, cooking and feeding him, laying in the furry bed talking to him at night. He had not fathomed the values of such cherished belongings until now, tonight, when he realized harshly that he had lost them. He had not considered these privileges valuable so wrapped and engrossed was his mind and emotions on taking him sexually. And regretfully, he remembered all that Ruben had said to him, the timely advice, especially what he had said about their having sex, something like: *What then, after sex?*

Yes . . . what then? Nothing but loneliness and lostness

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of heart and mind. Sex had been nothing, though wondrous it was, compared to Ruben himself as a person, his great male significance, his awed and unforgettable personality. He had had these things about him, as he had had this cabin, this bed, his animals, without realizing the significance of them. Now, in despair and heartbreak, he saw how wonderful, how essential these things really were to him, and he prayed silently for his mere bodily presence, the sound of his voice, his smile, the dazzle in his eyes. These were the cherished things, the sought after things about people—not primarily their sex potentials—and he realized now for the first time what Ruben had tried to tell him about sex.

Someday you will live to regret this, Ruben had told him, and he was already regretting it. Not the sex act itself, but the profound ecstasy of it, the power, the magnetism which threatened to disarrange his mind. Without it he had not known the magnified joy of it, the wild undaunted ecstasy. Now he knew. And knowing, he sensed that he would go insane if he could not partake of it again, and again, and again. Like a maddening drug whose rapturous effects he had witnessed and gloried, he must continue to have Ruben's body. Like a ravenous animal tasting blood, he had tasted the glory of the male, the glory that was Ruben, and he lay starving for more. Wild dreams would haunt him and those same dreams would destroy him unless Ruben came to him, gave him his male wonders.

Yet, even in his wild and relentless hunger, he realized that only to see Ruben again would be enough to satisfy him. To see him in the cabin with him would be a fulfilled joy. To lay with him would be heaven. To have his body would be paradise.

I may never see him or touch him again, he sobbed into his hands, as all feeling, except his feeling for Ruben, returned to haunt him, returned to remind him of his loss.

Finally rising from the bed, he dragged the straight chair up to the front doorway and sat down in the darkness facing the river. The lapping of the waves fell on the hollowness of his heart and the silvery tide coming in on

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the long stretch of sand looked sad and empty in the moonlight. A bobcat screamed from the swamp, from a great distance, and its piercing cry only stirred in Gabriel an even more terrible lostness. The music of the night only made him sadder. The silences depressed him. And the Gulf wind on his nakedness only intensified his loneliness for Ruben. He had sat with him like this during the many balmy evenings, and all this accumulation of nature's wonders only added to his feelings of loss and heartbreak.

He sat remembering the little things about Ruben he had failed to notice or appreciate before: the way his eyes glinted when he said or saw something funny, the swashbuckling effect the Viking mustache lent to his masculinity, the bravado manner in which he expressed things, trying not to impress with falseness or pride, the calm way he enjoyed his pipe, the unconscious way he thrust one leg over the other, one ankle resting on the other knee, exposing his crotch, the way he would examine his nails to see if they were clean, the hurt looks he gave if he thought he had said something wrong, his apologetic attitude, the quiet rapture of his reactions to anything purely physical, the innocence blended into his maturity.

All these little things came and went before his mind, hurting his heart, picturing the emptiness of his future. Little things being branded on his thoughts, robbing him of sanity.

He thought too of his sex, his prolonged drive, the completeness of him during the throes of passion. He was a thing beautiful and adored even in his most uninhibited state, graceful even in the act of sex, and so clean he smelled like love . . . the love that men should wear in the cave of their thighs, the soft texture of their abdomens, the contours of their arms and shoulders, a beauty unequaled, for nature had outdone herself while creating the male, showing greater partiality than when she had created woman.

Well, I've had him, Gabriel moaned, heartbrokenly considering that once would never be enough, and that he would be haunted by the memory of it for the rest of his

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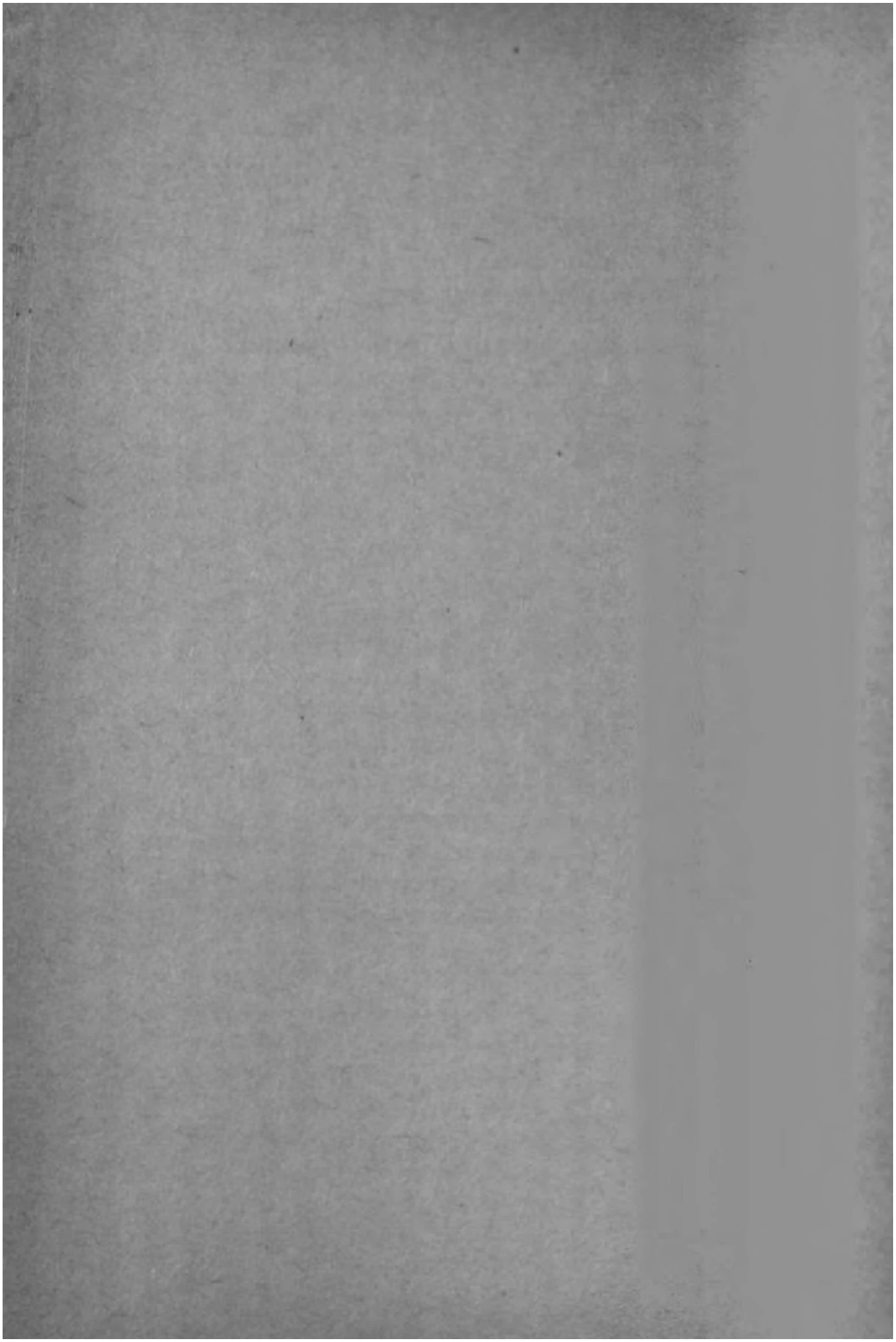
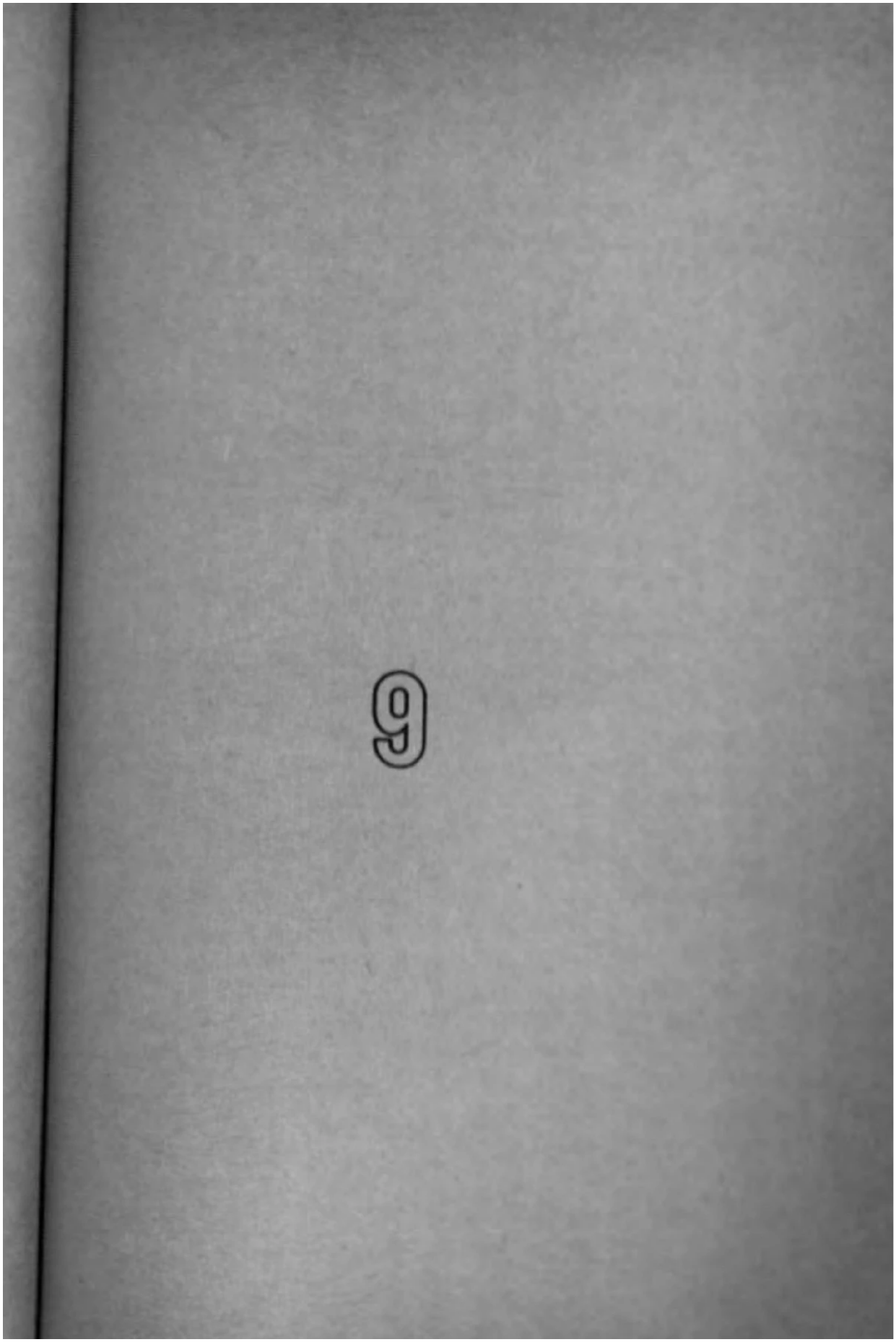
life. A haunt that would infiltrate his mind, eating away at his heart like a disease, and would follow him in his waking hours and fruitless dreams.

He looked away over the expanse of the lake where Ruben had ridden off, and he cried from the bottom of his soul, "Come back! Ruben, please come back!"

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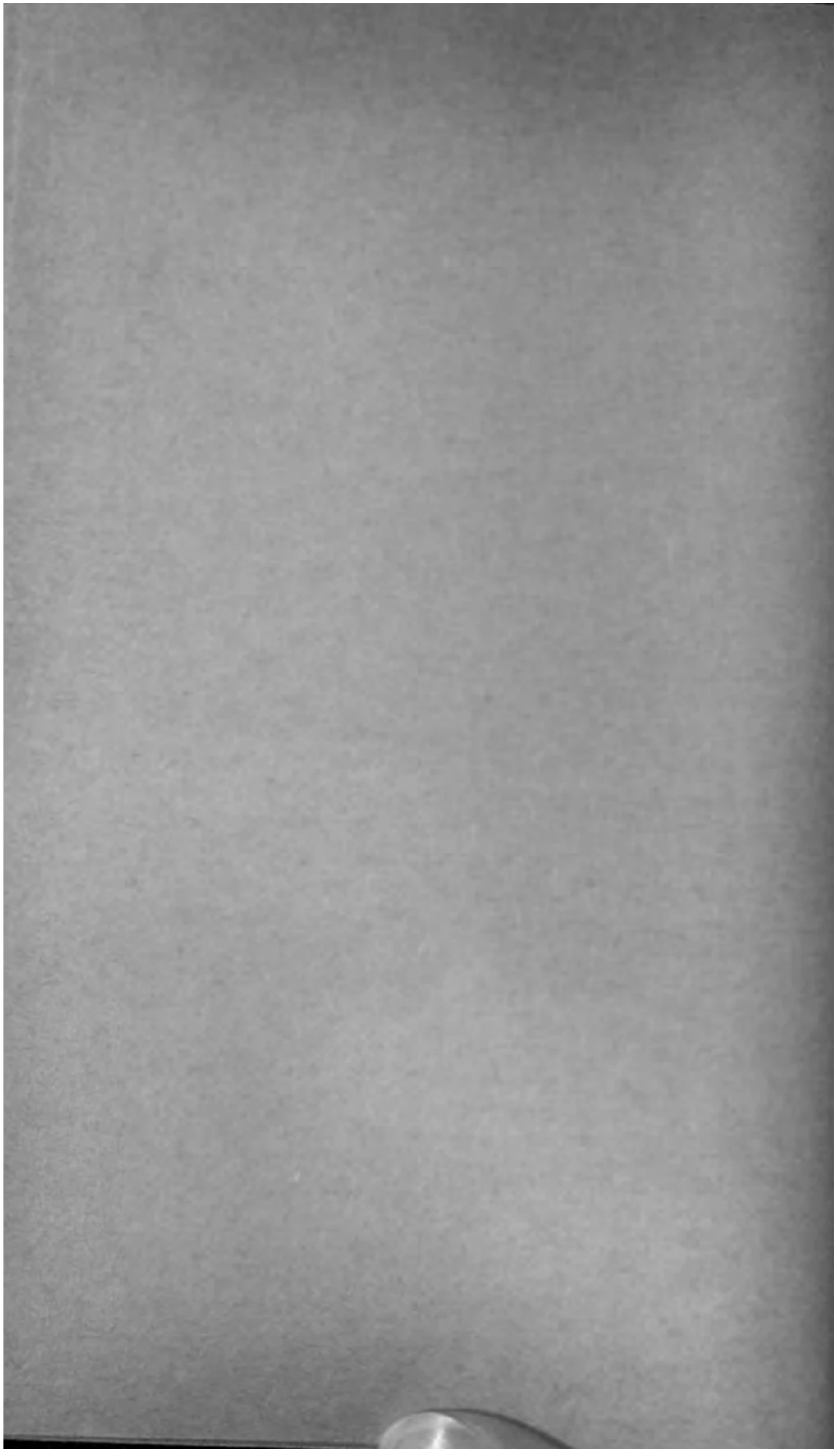

Days passed on into other days, then a week, two weeks, and Gabriel, strung of nerve and patience, lived in a hollow nightmare.

He went about the cabin and sand dune moping, occasionally speaking to his pet hawk and coon and pigeons, but never conscious of what he was doing. Ruben stayed on his mind constantly, and every beat of his frantic heart cried bitterly: Ruben! Ruben! Ruben!

Whatever he was doing, he would automatically look up, scan the horizon with burning, tearful eyes for signs of a horse and rider coming in his direction, but each time he looked he fell back in disappointment.

Ruben was gone, his soul cringed, and he was never coming back!

In his rapt delirium, he dared not venture to St. Martinville for supplies or to his father's farm, in fear that Ruben might come and discover him missing. So he remained in and around the cabin, and then as close as possible, forever hopeful, but forever with a sinking heart. Game was plentiful, so he hunted with his bow and arrow for food, though he had little or no appetite, and he threw to the pigeons or the wild hog under the house most of what he killed and cooked. He hardly slept, and days and nights merged into vague limbos without effort or meaning. He lost interest in the cabin, where once he had loved it, and everywhere he looked, night or day, there were sharp reminders of Ruben to further haunt him. He tried hiking around the edge of the lake, tried to take an interest in shell collecting and wild plants, but to no avail. Everything he saw or touched was just so much more saltless food for him to hopelessly digest, and his brooding and preoccupation over Ruben drained him of every ambition, every interest.

He had read a poem once which seemed to fit him perfectly, and when he thought he could endure not a moment more without him, he would mutter it to himself.

"The mind has a thousand eyes, the heart but one. Yet the light of a whole life dies when love is done."

The light of his own life was done, he concluded mar times, especially when he searched the dim horizons f signs of Ruben, and he felt profoundly that his heart w already dead, just a shell like a robin's egg when the insid is sucked out. A hollow, soulless shell.

Ruben had given to his young life its only essentia worthwhile meaning, and now that he was gone there wa nothing that could take his place, fill in the important gap All these things he sensed acutely, especially when he stoo over the fur bed and looked at the nest of his and Ruben' love spawning, the hearth where they had sat so cozily, th wharf where they had gone swimming, the sand dune wher they had lain to get tanned, the doorway of the cabi where they had sat on evenings and talked.

Now, life was but a maw of light and darkness, of sound which held no promising meaning, of silences which only echoed the misery in his dying heart. Even nature wa against him, he imagined, the sandhill crane with its terribl screech, the leopard frogs with their awesome chanting, th pileated woodpeckers hammering away on some dead tree like the hammering in his tortured soul, the wood ibis with its hollow intonations, like it was choking on its own lungs the crazy, zigzag swaying of the swamp grass in the changeable wind, the ghost streamers of moss piled in the cypress trees, like a white army standing vigil over him, and the lapping of the waters around the cabin, that constant lapping, like the lolling tongues of the invisible trying to suck him into its watery grave.

Even the skies seemed against him, from close heights yielding great storm clouds which stayed, or rather did not stay, buffeted about constantly by blustering gales, and long enough to have extraordinary consequences on his lonely, hollow life, his throbbing heartbreak.

A change seemed to come over the lake, the land, the little island where stood his cabin. Rain fell frequently, but only in fitful gusts, which were no sooner over than they began again. When the sun did shine, it tried to burst through the heavy purple clouds, and the air and light lay as under some terrible scouraging. Everything looked gray

and somber, adding fitfully to his woebegone moods, and winds came and went like mournful reapers, sighing forlornly, bending low to flatten the emerald-green grasses, to fling the moss in maddening tendrils, and to rattle the dead limbs of the cypress and the driftwood pieces Gabriel had nailed to the outer walls of the cabin.

Everything was so obscure and weathered, so dead under his wearying gaze, that he felt he lived beneath the tides. So much water fell each day, like gray mourning veils, and there was so much water lapping round his cabin door, that he grew, not only from the falling rain and his own heartbreak, inward into himself, like a turtle in its shell, or a crawfish in its puddle. He became hemmed in, engulfed by torrents of water and loneliness, and in this terrible scouraging of rain he longed that he could end his life, by ending his sorrow, that he could end his pain, by robbing himself of all human pain.

One evening directly before nightfall the rains had abated, and the low sun in the west sprinkled some of its wet light down on his little cabin and sandy atoll. Everything looked drenched, the greens still greener, the emeralds diffused, the grays of the moss dirty and da The lake too looked dark and shiny, the rough water fr the Gulf winds making long powerful waves, trouble relentless, fathomless. And the water far out looked like in spreading to the horizon.

Gabriel came out of the cabin and stood for a brief moment on the topmost step. He was naked as usual, and there was a dullness about his features, his facial expression, his eyes lusterless, red-rimmed with tears. He had had one of his frequent weeping spells, having cried on the furry bed all afternoon, and now he looked disheveled, drained, weary of the nobleness that gives life to life.

His mind was set, almost in a brutish fashion, set so firmly in his groping skull that his teeth showed through his tightly fixed skin, and the little silvery scar appeared wider and longer down the primitive profile of his immobile face. As if from some instinctive lesson he had previously

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learned, a waif of memory, he took Nero from his perch and set him on his shoulder. Then he went slowly down the steps and through the sandy knoll to the wharf. Untying the dugout, he stepped inside and gave it a light shove into the water. Silently it went out, making a waving trail, and when it was a few hundred yards from shore, Gabriel pulled in the paddle and slipped over the side.

As he did so, he went in up to his nipples, as smoothly and as rippleless as a cork, remained for a moment without treading water, then began to slowly sink. When he submerged to the tip of his shoulders, Nero let out a wild shriek and began to flutter his enormous wings in awesome protest.

Gabriel continued to sink, the water coming to his chin, then to his lips, then his eyes. Nero had leaped up to the top of his head now, and was bobbing about recklessly, squawking loudly and continuously.

When the water, ink black, reached the level of Gabriel's eyes, he inhaled, filling his lungs until they wanted to burst. Flashes of light played wildly in his brain, and his vision became strangely blurred.

I want to die, his brain recorded. God . . . let me die!

But as he thought these things, gasping now for needed breath as the water burst in his lungs, he saw or thought he saw a man on horseback skirting the lake. He was a long way off, but a black speck on the yellow horizon, more a vision than a reality. And Gabriel left it as that. Too often during his immediate past he had thought he had seen a man on horseback coming through the swamps, so delirious was his sobriety, that he considered this an illusion, a similar vision, a prolonged and demanding actuality.

"It can't be him! It can't be him!" he gasped, as he went under, as everything turned a livid yellow, then black, then yellow again. He felt the black water pouring into his mouth, flooding his lungs, heard the wild screams of Nero as he tried to remain afloat, then complete blackness, complete oblivion.

When he awakened he was lying on the wharf on his

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belly and Ruben was bending over him, giving him artificial respiration.

Ruben!

He coughed, spit up water as his tortured lungs were relieved. When he was able to sit up, Ruben cuddled him in his arms, holding him firmly, warmly, at long last!

"What you trying to pull, Gabe?" Ruben cried excitedly, but then smiled gravely. "Another Alexander and Hephaestion?"

"You . . . you never would come . . . so . . . I . . . I," Gabe cried, between spits of water.

"So you tried to end it all," Ruben said. "You little fool. I told you I was coming back, didn't I?"

Gabriel sat up more rigidly, hung his legs over the wharf.

"Have you come back?" he asked tiredly, beginning to sob.

Ruben looked at him with genuine passion in his eyes, and he hugged him to his chest.

"Yes, Gabe, I have come back, this time to stay, if you want me to."

Gabriel answered with his eyes, as all reason, all care fled except his burning love for Ruben.

Ruben nudged him on the chin playfully.

"You know Nero saved your life?"

Gabriel shook his head, took a glance at Nero fluttering on the far end of the wharf, shaking water from his wings.

"No," he answered halfheartedly.

"Well, he did," Ruben explained. "I saw him fluttering in the water when I was half a mile down the lake, and I knew something was wrong. If it hadn't been for him, you'd have drowned, boy, sure as you're born."

"I'm . . . I'm grateful to him," Gabriel sputtered, the sound of his voice primed with water which still ran from his lungs.

"Well, I am, too," Ruben declared, gazing down at him. "I don't know what I would have done if I had gotten here and not found you." And he sighed. "I want you to know that, Gabe, now, this moment."

Gabriel nodded his head in understanding, but the real

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understanding cried wildly from his heart.

Ruben helped him up and they went into the cabin. There Ruben took a towel and dried him off and lay him on the furry bed.

"It's my turn now to wait on you," he said. And he went to the hearth and stirred up the coals. Then he slid round the pot and poured in a fruit jar filled with courtbouillon. Anxious to please, he sliced French bread, warmed over the quail, and made hot coffee. When it was done he fixed a tray and brought it to Gabriel's bed.

"I'm not much of a cook, but I think you're going to enjoy it," he said, beaming with pride.

"It looks wonderful," Gabriel said, as his true senses were once more restored, his broken heart mended and as good as new—perhaps a little better, for his heart-wounds had deepened and softened and matured him, and he now saw Ruben in a different light. He saw him as a man, not a God, a warm and thoughtful human, and the little things Ruben was now doing for him were the only things he needed or wanted presently. Just his being here beside him was enough. He could ask for nothing more.

Yet, when they had both finished their meal and the trays were lain aside, and Gabriel was restored to his natural self, he dared to ask—but it did not matter, since he had Ruben at last, and that was all that would ever matter to him in the future.

"Just why did you come back, Ruben, after all this time?"

Ruben glanced at him, then went to the opened doorway where he looked out on the stormy night, at the enormous purple clouds riding herd over the sky, shifting, changing shape under the wistful strokes of the wind.

"I didn't intend to . . . at first," he finally answered, his back to Gabriel, his huge frame blocking the entrance. "But after the snake bite and all, and that business about Lottie, Nan and I split up. We broke up once before, then went back together. I knew I should never have gone back to her, knew it was never going to work."

Gabriel fairly beamed. He feasted his gnawing eyes on

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Ruben's broad back, noticed how his buttocks stood out despite his heavy gray uniform, and the old sensations welled up in him again.

"Divorced . . . for good?"

"Not divorced, not just yet," Ruben answered. "But quits for good. I'll never go back to her, never. I have no feelings for her at all, nothing."

He came back into the room and sat on the edge of the bed next to Gabriel. He stared at the floor for a pensive moment, not speaking, his arms on his elongated thighs, his hands entertwined, his broad shoulders hunched forward.

"I guess a man changes after a while," he began, his voice soft, pliable. "At least I have. Once I thought our kind of life together would be outrageous. But now I think differently. At least it is better this way to live and be happy, than to live that other kind of life, the married kind, and stay miserable."

"But are you sure you want this now?" Gabriel could not help but asking, though he basked in Ruben's newly found declarations concerning their relation. "I mean, is this just a momentary substitute to fill in your life until you've come up with something better . . . say another woman?"

"Don't talk nonsense," Ruben said, turning to eye him. "I'll never take up with another woman as long as I live. All Nan and I have done since I went back is fuss, fuss, fuss. I am sick to death of it. I never liked arguing anyway, and I hate a nagging woman. We're through, and if you want me, if you want me to stay here with you . . . then I'll stay."

Their gaze on each other met for a brief moment and held.

"You know I still want you," Gabriel declared, after a brief pause. He was too profoundly happy to consider otherwise, and he dared not pursue the idea that Ruben would eventually tire of him and this primitive outdoor life.

Ruben then rose and pulled off his clothes. He came to the bed and stood above Gabriel, the giant symbol of love and sex and male personified.

"So let's not discuss it any more," he said, laying down

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on the fur beside Gabriel, placing his hands behind his head. "Let's just live . . . the way we both want to live."

He snuggled up to Gabriel, who lay waiting. There was a deep silence for a moment, as the rapidly paced sound of their breathing mingled with the sounds of the night, the water lapping beside the wharf, the bumping of the little dugout, the rasping of Nero's sharp claws as he went up and down his perch, frogs, crickets, the fragrant wind, the sizzling of the coals, the rattling of the windowpanes.

"Are you happy . . . now?" Ruben asked, then let out a contented sigh.

"Yes, very happy," Gabriel answered. "Thanks to you, Ruben, and to Nero."

"That's right, don't forget Nero," Ruben whispered, as he pulled Gabriel into his arms. "And don't forget me . . . ever."

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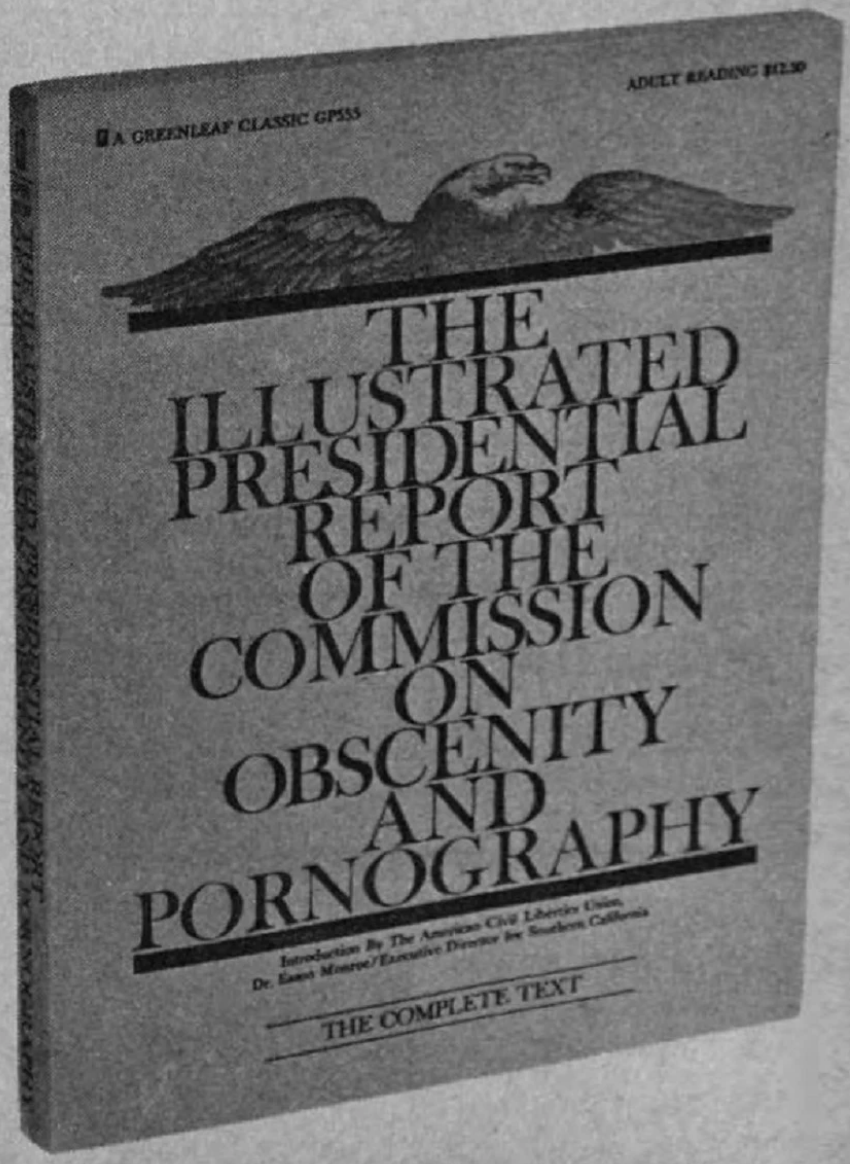

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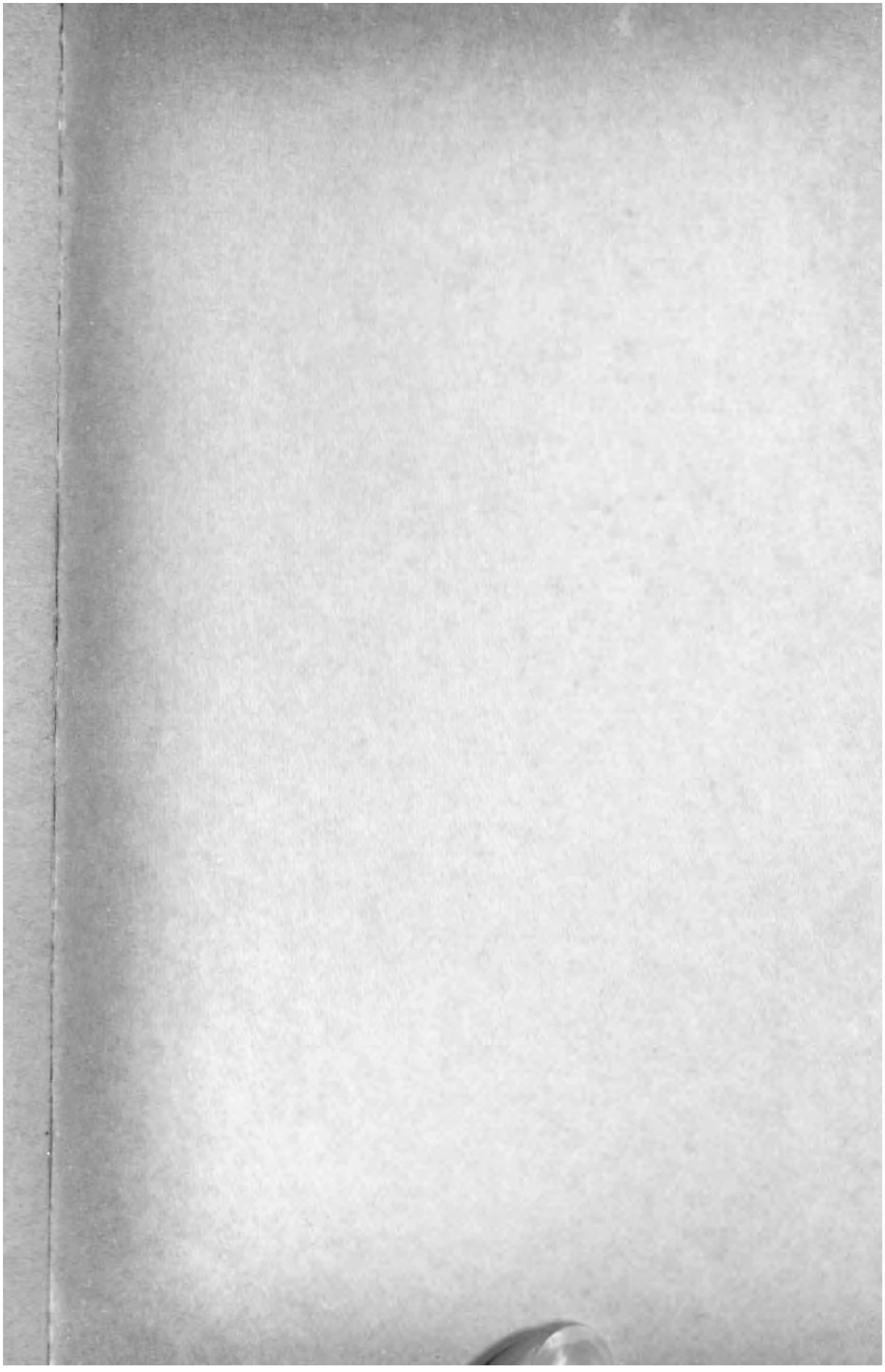

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